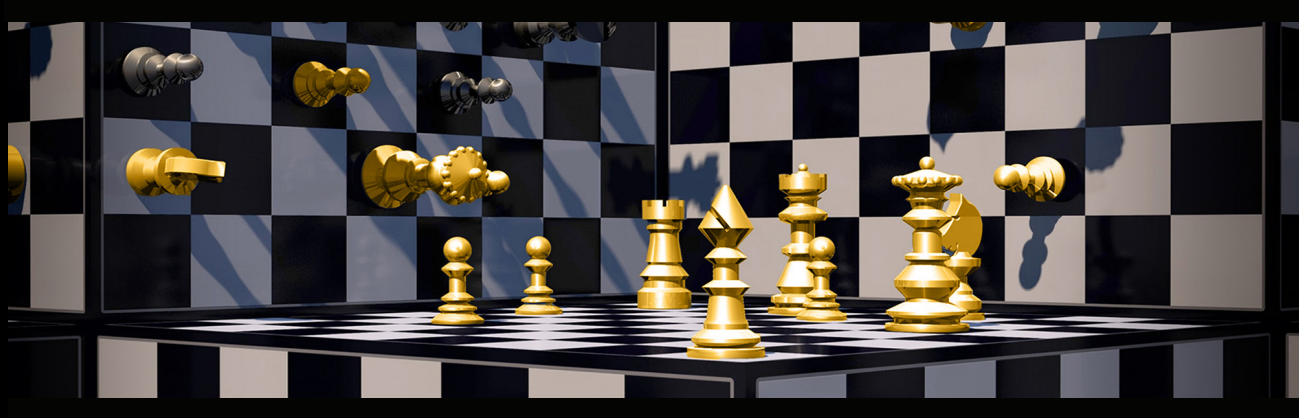




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# PERSPECTIVES



## Foreign Governments' Investments in Entertainment and Movies as Instruments of Soft Power and Influence in Irregular Warfare

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In the ever-evolving landscape of irregular warfare, foreign governments recognize the potential of soft power as a means to wield influence, shape global perceptions, and conduct direct and indirect information operations. With a decrease in traditional conflicts and conventional war, the increasing importance of employing irregular warfare, characterized by *non-traditional methods and asymmetric tactics*, means that nations have recognized the importance of increasingly turning to investment, development, and control in the arena of entertainment as potent tools for projecting soft power and exerting influence both domestically and abroad. Over 10 years ago, the Army chief of staff, Marine Corps commandant, and U.S. Special Operations commander [critiqued the U.S.'s lack of irregular warfare capabilities](#). In the past 10 years, the U.S. failed to address those critiques and bolster irregular warfare practices, while foreign adversaries like Russia and China actively "[embraced new approaches](#) to the human domain concept for warfighting." The U.S. needs to focus on the entertainment industry as irregular warfare's battleground of the future.

[Soft power](#) refers to a nation's ability to shape the preferences and behaviors of other actors through persuasion and attraction rather than coercion. Hard power refers to a state's use of coercion, threats, or military power to change other actors' behaviors. Irregular warfare can be conceptualized as in between soft and hard power. [Irregular warfare](#) encompasses a spectrum of unconventional tactics employed by state and non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives, including strategic messaging, information operations, and sentiment influence. This allows governments to achieve their goals without forcing another state to do its bidding. In the context of irregular warfare, foreign governments' investments in entertainment and movies are an element of a broader irregular campaign aimed at exerting influence, fostering cultural affinity, advancing a nation's agendas, and potentially preparing or shaping a battlefield.

### Tools of Culture

Foreign governments recognize the [immense reach and impact](#) the entertainment industry has in shaping popular culture and global narratives. By investing in the production and distribution of movies, documentaries, and television shows, these nations subtly promote their own values, ideals, and perspectives while potentially shaping the information warfare battlespace in both an offensive and defensive





capacity. This cultural exchange not only serves as a bridge between nations but also allows governments to influence public opinion, challenge negative stereotypes, and enhance their global image. Through collaborations with artists, filmmakers, and production companies, governments create a platform for shared narratives that resonate with audiences worldwide. Rather than coercing others, foreign governments influence and shape narratives related to their countries, cultures, and religion.

The global rise and expansion of K-Pop (Korean Pop) over the past two decades exemplifies the power of the entertainment industry as a form of soft power. Following the liberation of [South Korean media in the 1980s](#), music studios spent years cultivating artists and building relationships with other industries. The industry focused on gaining recognition from listeners at home and abroad, and they succeeded: bands like BlackPink and Twice broke the Billboard 100, signaling commercial success and cultural integration. While the development and expansion of music generally is politically innocuous, K-Pop artists and music have been used to advance [or been punished for making political statements](#). In 2016, K-Pop was “blasted from loudspeakers set up on the border” by the South Koreans on Kim Jong Un’s birthday as part of an ongoing [propaganda campaign](#). The music mix included “anti-Kim rhetoric and K-pop music,” which the North Koreans saw as a direct threat to Pyongyang’s control of information.

In the same year, a K-Pop group faced backlash from China over their support for Taiwan. While the lead singer, Chou Tzu-yu, later retracted her statement and instead vowed that there “[is only one China](#),” she became another tool of influence being used instead by the Chinese government. Other K-Pop stars were encouraged to help to spread the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda. In 2016 and 2017, China canceled concerts and prohibited K-Pop streaming in China to message disapproval of the installation of the U.S.-created [THAAD missile defense system](#) in South Korea. This limitation of K-Pop in China had both a soft power intent, restricting South Korean cultural influence, and a hard power intent, hurting South Korea’s economy. The K-Pop industry could try to balance the restrictions set forth by China to regain both economic and cultural benefits. However, by blending both hard power consequences with soft power perceptions, China begins to enact control over the industry, showing the effectiveness of irregular warfare.

### **Controlling Media through IW**

Governments are moving from soft power tactics to information warfare-informed influence and coercion, and there are numerous examples of the entertainment industry acquiescing to foreign government demands. The entertainment industry often cannot withstand threats to limit its access and impede its market power. China’s acceptance into the World Trade Organization and a subsequent legal case in 2007 about film industry protections resulted in a quota of 34 Hollywood films entering China. Even with the quota, China bans and censors parts of movies and often requires elements to be altered, thereby controlling the narrative.

For example, pressure from the Chinese government resulted in changes to the 2012 version of *Red Dawn*, depicting the invading forces as North Korean instead of Chinese, and to the 2022 *Top Gun* sequel when the Chinese government forced a [Taiwan patch](#) to be censored and edited from the actor Tom Cruise’s jacket. China successfully used its market power as leverage, controlling the narrative not only for its own citizens but for international audiences as well. *Top Gun* and *Top Gun Maverick*’s antagonists [remained nameless](#) so that the film could be shown in states such as China and Russia. While the directors could have easily named any adversary as the main enemy, doing so could have jeopardized U.S. economic interest in foreign markets.

Despite these efforts to meet Chinese censorship requirements, *Top Gun Maverick* was not shown in China. Following the backlash in the U.S., the patch on Tom Cruise’s jacket [switched back](#) to the Taiwan patch.

Censorship campaigns are another avenue available to states to control messaging. Recent examples of this are the 2022 documentary on Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the 2020 documentary on Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi; both documentaries failed to find an outlet for immediate distribution as most outlets feared repercussions from Russia and Saudi Arabia. Over time, however, the documentaries gained accolades and are



now available to rent or purchase across several platforms. *Navalny* documents the recovery process of Navalny after he was poisoned, and as he searched for answers, he discovered a plot that included President Vladimir Putin. *Navalny* premiered at Sundance and was shown in a special screening following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The documentary won an Oscar, while Alexei Navalny was arrested. *The Dissident* tells the story of Jamal Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* journalist who entered the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey and never came out. His fiancée began a search for answers and uncovered a coverup stemming from all levels of the Saudi government. *The Dissident* is now available on streaming services. Both films depicted massive concealment efforts led by the countries in question and threatened the chosen narrative of the states whose governments and leaders were named as the antagonists. These documentaries highlight how states will silence alternative narratives to control the story, especially when it threatens their concerns.

### **Shaping the Story**

China, [Saudi Arabia](#), [Iran](#), and others have increased funding and support for the production of movies that depict favorable national narratives or showcase the achievements of the sponsoring nation. Controlling the messaging enables governments to influence global perceptions, counter adversarial narratives, and create positive associations with their country's brand. This approach allows them to exert influence beyond their borders and establish a long-lasting impression in the minds of international audiences, especially if the productions or broadcasts are targeted outside of their countries.

Movies and television possess the unique ability to captivate audiences, invoke emotions, and disseminate narratives that can shape public opinion and perceptions. Foreign governments recognize this power and often utilize film as a tool for propaganda and perception management of both internal and external markets. The Chinese-sponsored war film, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), is loosely based on the 1950 Battle of Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. The film depicts the 12 divisions of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPV) as the underdog in the battle against Allied troops during the Korean War. The homage played to the CPV reflects China's efforts to change perspectives: while history remembers a Chinese loss in this battle, entertainment creates a Chinese victory. According to the Chinese state-run news source, the *Global Times*, the "[Changjin Lake Effect](#)" permeates all levels of society because the story truly belongs to the Chinese, as their martyrs are more remarkable "[compared with those heroes that only exist in movies.](#)" Internationally, the film [was not well received](#) because of the over-the-top congratulatory tone. In an effort to control the internal narrative, China arrested any Chinese citizens who criticized the film.

In the context of irregular warfare, foreign governments recognize that investment in entertainment and movies serves as a powerful tool to advance their strategic objectives and messaging. By influencing cultural perceptions, governments aim to gain sympathy, support, and cooperation from local populations resulting in broader cultural and economic benefits. These investments can assist in winning the hearts and minds of target audiences, fostering a positive perception of the sponsoring nation, and mitigating the effects of asymmetric warfare tactics.

### **Potential and Threats of Streaming Services**

Sometimes states choose to go outside the scope of controlling the narrative to attack consumers and disrupt streaming. The 2014 Sony [hack](#) showed the vulnerabilities of the streaming side of entertainment and the extent foreign governments could go to control narratives. U.S. intelligence agencies traced the hack back to North Korea and related the attack to *The Interview*, a parody film critical of North Korea. For months before *The Interview's* release, government spokespeople from North Korea accused the U.S. of sponsoring terrorism and threatened that anyone who went to see *The Interview* would suffer a "[bitter fate.](#)" Eventually, many U.S. theaters refused to show the movie, though it was still available for rent and online streaming.

The entertainment industry and streaming services like Netflix, though vulnerable to attacks, help bring content and different perspectives to people around the world. Netflix commands influence and mastered the practice of



“[glocalization](#),” the combination of globalization and localization, resulting in the global spread of locally created products. Netflix can humanize stories that ignore the interests of states and focuses on people. Shows like [Squid Game](#), a satirical thriller that details the inordinate amounts of debt Koreans have, or the documentary [In Her Hands](#), which follows the story of Afghanistan’s youngest female mayor leading up to the Taliban takeover, are shot in local communities and broadcast globally to facilitate [cultural diffusion](#). This social process allows for elements of one culture to bleed into another, breaking down stereotypes and perceptions in the process. Some states prohibit access to uncontrolled narratives: [China](#) is one of three countries whose citizens do not have access to Netflix because the Chinese government could not control what its citizens would see. Instead, China created its own streaming service to provide access to approved narratives.

### **The United States’ Next Chapter**

To understand the messaging from our allies and adversaries alike, the United States needs to be up-to-date on pop culture and well-versed in the history of a region, as it is no longer enough just to shape messages and influence narratives. The entertainment industry is shaping up to be the next playground for irregular warfare, and to compete, the U.S. needs to increase its cultural knowledge. While this starts in the educational system by providing greater cultural education to all citizens to increase their cultural fluency, U.S. agencies need to provide more training on lived cultures and local languages and dialects to their employees stationed in foreign cultures, especially those stationed abroad. Training exists for Foreign Service Officers, but those in other departments, especially military personnel, [receive limited training](#) related to culture and language. While streaming services can help provide first-person narratives, U.S. agencies need to provide context of what life is like on the ground in order to fully understand the cultural nuances of the messaging embedded in irregular warfare. Messaging matters, but it cannot be fully exploited if the full scope of what is being said is not understood.

In the current era of irregular warfare and hyper-connectedness, utilizing soft power is crucial for the DoD to advance its missions and strategic messaging. Its [current position](#) of advising on films fails to position the U.S. to meet future challenges. While it should not control the narrative, DoD needs to better imbed itself in the industry. To achieve this, the DoD must maintain its collaboration with entertainment liaison offices and expand its minimal presence at the local level in foreign countries by connecting with foreign entertainment industries and serving as contracted experts. Expanding and increasing engagement with foreign entertainment sectors enables the DoD to support and influence foreign entertainment industries, countering the impact of foreign malign actors who seek to promote their narratives and extend influence beyond their borders.

Foreign governments’ investments in entertainment and movies as instruments of soft power and influence in irregular warfare represent a strategic response to the changing dynamics of global conflicts. Recognizing the potential of these domains to shape public opinion, cultivate cultural affinity, and project national values, governments leverage their involvement to achieve diverse objectives. As we navigate an era of complex geopolitical challenges, understanding the significance of these investments in promoting soft power and countering irregular warfare becomes essential for comprehending the intricacies of contemporary statecraft.



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