

## What China does when it disagrees with you

Three recent developments have highlighted China's growing influence over foreign governments and civil society. In the past, China has admonished other countries to move beyond a "Cold War mentality"—presumably meaning engaging in relentless global competition using all means available. Yet these developments suggest that China itself may have learnt a lesson or two from it. The much touted Chinese principle of "non-interference" in the workings of other powers is past its sell-by date in Xi Jinping's China.

First, over the summer, Australians found themselves debating growing and pernicious Chinese influence in their society and politics. This has included the use of Chinese citizens as well as Australian nationals of Chinese origin as de-facto agents of China's spy services. A five-month long investigation by a team of Australian journalists found that China is actively seeking to shape opinion in Australian universities, monitor and coerce Chinese dissidents, as well as funnel money to local politicians. The Australian intelligence services have expressed alarm at the "unprecedented scale" of Chinese penetration of their society.

Australia has long tried to manage the dissonance between its deep economic ties with China on one hand, and its reliance on US-led security arrangements in the region on the other. This has included pulling out of the quadrilateral initiative in 2007 in order not to offend Beijing. However, observers of the region sense that Chinese meddling in its domestic politics may force Australia to adopt a more assertive stance. Allegations of a Chinese hand in Australian society could have indeed contributed to its acquiescence to a "Quad 2.0".

Second, the 11 November meeting of Xi and South Korean president Moon Jae-in all but ended the possibility of further American missile defence systems in the Republic of Korea in the immediate future. These systems were to be deployed as a response to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests over the summer. The summit capped strenuous efforts by China to coerce Seoul into submission, including through ersatz sanctions, portending ill for the South Korean economy.

What was interesting was how China went about doing so: While Beijing did not officially sanction South Korea, it cleverly marshalled the Chinese public behind its economic offensive against that country. As a reaction to Seoul's decision to allow the American THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) system in South Korea, stores belonging to the South Korean supermarket chain Lotte in China were attacked with tacit support of the state apparatus. By boycotting Hyundai cars as well as vacations in South Korea, China managed to inflict considerable pain on Seoul. As a Hong Kong-based newspaper triumphantly titled a story on this sordid saga, "China Wins Its War Against South Korea's US THAAD Missile Shield—Without Firing A Shot."

Third, some reports suggest Beijing may have green-lighted the 14 November coup in Zimbabwe that aimed at deposing the nonagenarian dictator Robert Mugabe. Ties between the two countries have been deep and long-standing, with Mugabe widely seen as China-friendly. However, an informed conjecture posits it might have been protection of Chinese economic interests that pushed Beijing to tip the scale away from Mugabe. The suspicion stems principally from the fact that the chief of Zimbabwe's military, Constantino Chiwenga, met with the Chinese defence minister only four days before the coup.

Wang Hongyi, a scholar from China's premier think-tank confidently declared: "After the military operation (referring to the coup), Zimbabwe will be more open." Laying the blame for Zimbabwe's faltering economy at Mugabe's door, Wang also noted that "Chinese investment in Zimbabwe has also fallen victim to Mugabe's policy and some projects were forced to close down or move to other countries in recent years, bringing huge losses." "Mugabe's policy" presumably refers to the

recent push to enforce indigenization laws that require a majority control of companies by Zimbabwean citizens.

It is hardly a secret that China has tried to intervene in local politics and shape elections in other countries in the past. Nepal is a case in point. However, Chinese influence is hardly limited to impoverished countries in dire need of capital. European politicians off-the-record note how China has started to influence local stakeholders—often at a very micro level—to promote its business interests. However, should the suspicion of a Chinese role in the Zimbabwe coup turn out to be accurate, it would imply that, going forward, China would not be averse to changing regimes abroad directly.

The Australian and South Korean episodes also suggest that China sees very little difference in deploying state agents and non-affiliated citizens to meet foreign-policy ends. A worrying corollary to this is the possibility of “ordinary” Chinese nationals abroad having covert roles. A recent report of an American government body suggests that this may already be the case. The US-China Economic And Security Review Commission noted in its latest report to the US Congress that *Xinhua*, the official Chinese news agency, often functions as an intelligence agency and actively engages in influence operations.

While Beijing puts its mouth to the cause of a post-Cold War “mentality”, its money is increasingly on more muscular influence around the world. How the world, in turn, responds, remains to be seen.

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