

POLICY BRIEF

Feb 25, 2019

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Countering Foreign Influence and Interference in Open Societies —A Japanese Perspective on Authoritarian Infiltration

Hideshi Tokuchi

1. Introduction

It is almost a cliché that Australia and New Zealand are canaries in the coal mine for Chinese attempts at exerting political influence.¹ In fact, Chinese influence is not a topic that affects just Oceania. It is already a serious challenge that confronts all democracies and open societies. According to Clive Hamilton's "Silent Invasion," a Chinese diplomat who sought political asylum in Australia told Hamilton that Australia's openness, relatively small population, a large number of Chinese immigrants and commitment to multiculturalism have weakened Australia's capacity to recognize and defend against the Chinese infiltration,² but all democracies and open societies are susceptible to the threat.

The expression "sharp power" is only a few years old, but the phenomena represented by the concept are much older. Hamilton's "Silent Invasion" begins

1 John Garnaut, "How China interferes in Australia- And how Democracies Can Push Back," *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia>; Amy Searight, "Chinese Influence Activities with U.S. Allies and Partners in Southeast Asia," Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 5, 2018, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180406_Hearing_Amy%20Searight_Written_Statement_April%205%202018.pdf?u6.PMk9Xjxi7ojAhLXIImnv_OciYnjHE3.

2 Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*, Hardie Grant Books, 2018, p. 3.

with an incident that happened in April 2008 in Canberra, when pro-Tibet protesters clashed with tens of thousands of Chinese students who were attempting to “defend the sacred Olympic torch.”³ Because people, knowledge, information and everything else move more rapidly, worldwide, and at a lower cost, incidents of this type occur more often than before.

Authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia are taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of open societies without opening up their own societies. China is not the only country that is engineering tactics of influence and interference. The Russians are conducting similar operations. The Russian way is not the same as the Chinese way, but Moscow and Beijing are capitalizing on the asymmetrical nature of two types of society, i.e., open societies and closed societies of authoritarian nature. This asymmetrical relationship is not new. It is the same as the confrontation between capitalist regimes and communist regimes during the Cold War days, but today neither the Chinese nor the Russians dye our societies red or make them closed. Beijing and Moscow are exploiting the openness and freedom of our societies to their advantage. According to Shin Kawashima, “China’s relations with the outside world are essentially unbalanced and lacking in reciprocity. China’s stance is that it does not envisage or accept others asking it for the same things it asks of them.”⁴

The present challenge is not completely new, but has some characteristics that may be particular to the age of globalization. The resulting violations of the sovereignty of other countries occur without the blatant use of physical military might. What is waged is what

may be called a form of gray zone warfare, that is, use of force that does not amount to an armed attack.

With these points in mind, this paper discusses the following three points: first, Chinese infiltration activities in the Indo-Pacific; second, the difference between influence and interference, or between soft power and sharp power; and third, how we should respond.

2. Chinese Infiltration Activities in the Indo-Pacific

Today, it is not difficult to find examples of China’s infiltration activities in the Indo-Pacific region. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is believed to be at the heart of most of the activities. Many people who analyze Chinese infiltration activities pay close attention to the educational organizations known as Confucius Institutes. The Institutes are affiliated primarily with China’s Ministry of Education, but they share deep ties with the UFWD,⁵ and therefore, I would like to first talk about the Confucius Institutes.

Confucius Institutes have two types of programs. Programs at the university level are administered by organizations called “Institutes,” while program at grade schools and secondary schools are conducted by units called “Classrooms.” What the institutes and classrooms are doing covertly is unknown, but according to some people, they are, along with some other agencies, engaged in “spreading China’s political agenda, suppressing academic debate, and stealing vital academic research.”⁶ Kawashima points out that the Institute plays

³ Ibid., p. ix.

⁴ Kawashima Shin, “The Confucius Institute in the One Belt, One Road Region,” *Discuss Japan – Japan Policy Forum*, No. 48, July 29, 2018, <https://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/diplomacy/pt20180729151525.html>.

⁵ Searight, “Chinese Influence Activities.”

⁶ Letter dated March 23, 2018 sent by US congressmen Michael McCaul and Henry Cuellar to heads of educational institutions in Texas: <https://tinyurl.com/y9d2a7yn>.

a part in China's propaganda policies by "nurturing individuals who can directly take onboard China's propaganda in Chinese."⁷ As of the end of 2015, there were 500 institutes and 1000 classrooms in 134 countries and regions.⁸ A year later, there were 511 institutes and 1,073 classrooms in 140 countries and regions.⁹ At the end of 2017, there were 525 institutes and 1,113 classrooms in 146 countries and regions.¹⁰ South Korea, Thailand, Kyrgyzstan and Japan are the top four countries in Asia which host Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. Out of 110 Institutes and 501 Classrooms in Asia, 23 Institutes and 13 Classrooms are in South Korea, 15 and 20 respectively in Thailand, 4 and 21 respectively in Kyrgyzstan, and 14 and 8 respectively in Japan.¹¹ Kawashima also points out that instead of being based on national-level cultural exchange agreements, Confucius Institutes are established through independent agreements with universities and that for this reason, Japan's Education Ministry has no involvement in setting up Confucius Institutes in Japan. He argues that this arrangement is very different from the activities of the Japan Foundation in China, which are governed by the cultural exchange agreement between Japan and China.¹²

Another example of how China exerts its influence is its imposition of restrictions on exports of rare-earth elements in 2010. On September 7, 2010, a Chinese fishing boat operating in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands rammed a Japan Coast Guard cutter that demanded the Chinese ship to leave the waters

near the Islands. The captain of the Chinese ship was arrested by Japan Coast Guard. The Chinese government responded by demanding the release of the captain. On September 24, some Japanese media reported that the Chinese government had stopped the export of rare-earth elements to Japan in retaliation for the arrest of the Chinese captain. China denied there was any connection between the events, saying that it was just controlling exports to crack down on smuggling. The Chinese captain was released in less than a month, but exports to Japan remained at an unusually low level until November. While other factors may have been at work behind the scene, there is a reasonable suspicion that the arrest may have triggered the restrictions on exports.¹³

A more recent example involving private companies, including those in Japan, is China's demand in late April 2018 to all 44 foreign airlines with flights to China. China told the air carriers to change their description of Taiwan to "Taiwan, China" in accordance with China's One-China Principle. Qantas of Australia accepted the demand but United Airlines of the US did not. ANA of Japan did not refer to any country names and just listed all the major airports of China and Taiwan in a larger group called "East Asia," together with Seoul.¹⁴

Another case indirectly related to Japan has to do with the website of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which posted a link to a project of Professors John Dower

7 Kawashima, "The Confucius Institute."

8 Website of the Confucius Institute at J.F. Oberlin University, https://www.obirin.ac.jp/kongzi/introduction/about_kongzi/.

9 Website of the Confucius Institute at Kogakuin University, <http://cik.kogakuin.ac.jp/about/>.

10 Website of the Confucius Institute at Musashino University, <https://www.musashino-u.ac.jp/confucius/about/>.

11 http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm.

12 Kawashima, "The Confucius Institute."

13 Marukawa Tomoo, "2010-nen-no rea-aasu-kiki [Rare-Earth Crisis of 2010]," June 23, 2016, Social Sciences of Crisis Thinking, <http://web.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/crisis/essay/2010-2010979192-924201042010-wto201092219412010-nhk924924-120109220310180922461012781200920112102010.html>.

14 See the websites of Qantas, United Airlines, and ANA.

and Shigeru Miyagawa. The MIT website was attacked by Chinese Internet users around the world in late April 2006. The project dealt with Japan's relations with the world from the nineteenth century to the present. One of the project's units, entitled "Throwing off Asia," looked at the consequences of the Sino-Japanese war on Japan's view on China. Dower's website described a Japanese woodcut, which depicted Japanese soldiers executing helpless Chinese prisoners of war, as "an unusually frightful scene." Though Dower clearly condemned Japanese militarism, several Chinese student viewers saw just the opposite: they believed that by posting the picture of the atrocities, the two professors and MIT were celebrating Japanese racism, not condemning it. On April 26, a meeting was held at MIT with members of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association. There, the students shouted that the professors had been insensitive to the tremendous suffering of the Chinese people at the hands of Japanese militarism and there were even demands that MIT officially apologize to the offended "Chinese Community."¹⁵

Other incidents have taken place in the vicinity of Japan. In South Korea, Lotte provided a golf course in the country's south for the deployment of the US THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) system for defending against ballistic missiles. After the deployment of THAAD, China banned group travelling to South Korea, while cruise ships erased Korean

ports from their itineraries and some airlines cut flights. Nearly all of the 112 Lotte Mart stores in China were shut over alleged fire safety issues.¹⁶ There were protests in China calling for boycotting South Korean goods at that time.¹⁷

Finally, I would like to refer to an incident on August 14, 2018 related to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's visit to Los Angeles. After she visited an 85C bakery café in the city, angry Chinese netizens and the Chinese government harassed the Taiwanese-run chain into reaffirming the "1992 Consensus" on the status of Taiwan. 85C published a statement on their Weibo webpage apologizing and voicing support for the Communist Party of China.¹⁸

Having seen these incidents and others, we find that there are several patterns in the activities of authoritarian regimes as follow.

Authoritarian regimes have three major immediate objectives: first, asserting their political positions in targeted countries; second, slandering targeted countries or targeted people in those countries (The Russian "specialists" who pretended to be grassroots American activists and organized rallies against Hillary Clinton in the US presidential election in 2016¹⁹ are an example of this category.); and third, pilfering valuable information and data. The means for carrying out interference include first, public speeches and writings; second, benefits such as political donations; and third,

15 Peter Perdue, "Reflections on the "Visualizing Cultures" Incident," *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XVIII, No. 5, May/June 2006, <http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/perdue.html>.

16 Cynthia Kim and Hyunjoo Jin, "With China dream shattered over missile land deal, Lotte faces costly overhaul," *Reuters*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lotte-china-analysis/with-china-dream-shattered-over-missile-land-deal-lotte-faces-costly-overhaul-idUSKBN1CT35Y>.

17 Javier Hernandez, Owen Guo and Ryan McMorro, "South Korean Stores Feel China's Wrath as U.S. Missile System Is Deployed," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/china-lotte-thaad-south-korea.html>.

18 Scott Morgan, "85C Bakery Café kowtows to Chinese bullying, reaffirms 1992 Consensus, after Tsai signs pillow," *Taiwan News*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3507229>.

19 Dartunorro Clark, "Information warfare: How Russians interfered in 2016 election," *NBC News*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/information-warfare-how-russians-interfered-2016-election-n848746>.

coercive actions such as economic sanctions, demonstrations and civil violence. Actors carrying out such interference are sometimes governments or the Communist Party. In some cases, the actors are “private organizations” such as the Internet Research Agency, a Russian company that engaged in manipulating social media in the 2016 US presidential election. In other cases, the actors are Chinese students or angry Chinese people.

As in the case of the MIT website, some aspects of the political agenda in China’s interference operations are relevant to Japan. Even if influence operations were carried out outside Japan, Japanese people should not be indifferent, and should be made aware that this issue is not someone else’s business. Tokyo’s own situation is much different from the situation facing Canberra or Wellington, but there is no denying that similar things could happen in Japan. The Japanese should be more vigilant.

3. The difference between Influence and Interference

As long as these activities aimed at exerting influence are conducted in a lawful, transparent and non-violent way, they are similar to the public diplomacy carried out by open societies. As long as influence activities try to affect the public or the politics of our societies through attractive messages and persuasion in good faith, they are similar to the exercise of soft power employed by open societies. In theory,

there is a clear distinction between influence and interference, and between soft power and sharp power,²⁰ but in practice, the distinction is not necessarily discernible. For example, government backing of attempts at influence does not necessarily mean that the attempts are a sharp power threat.²¹ The distinction between soft power and sharp power cannot be the benchmark for distinguishing influence from interference. Soft power is neutral and not unique to democracies. With regard to this point, Joseph Nye observes, “Soft power is not good or bad in itself. It is not necessarily better to twist minds than to twist arms. Osama bin Laden neither threatened nor paid the men who flew aircraft into the World Trade Center – he had attracted them with his ideas. But although soft power can be used to evil ends, its means depend on voluntarism, which is preferable from the point of view of human autonomy.”²² As Nye says, it would be a mistake to prohibit authoritarian systems from attempts to exert soft power simply because they sometimes or often shade into sharp power. It would be a self-destructive effort on the part of open societies. What we have to be vigilant against is intrusive interference to manipulate public opinion through covert, corrupt or coercive efforts.²³ Such interference is different from the use of traditional tools of public diplomacy.

Interference activities are serious violations of the national sovereignty of targeted countries, but because those activities are covert, authoritarian governments can easily deny that they are behind the activities, and they can take

20 According to Nye, “If someone puts a gun to your head and demands your wallet, it does not matter what you want or think. That is hard power. If that person is trying to persuade you to freely give up your wallet, everything depends on what you want or think. That is soft power. Sharp power, the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a type of hard power. The manipulation of ideas, political perceptions, and electoral processes has a long history. ...What’s new is not the basic model; it’s the speed with which such disinformation can spread and the low cost of spreading it.” See Joseph Nye, Jr., “How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 24, 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com/print/1121771.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Searight, “Chinese Influence Activities.”

advantage of surprise. Almost the same can be said about the gray zone warfare carried out by China in East Asian bodies of water, particularly maritime militia intruding into the territorial waters of targeted countries disguised as fishermen. Political interference is yet another form of gray zone warfare. In discussing US policy toward gray zone tactics, Sam Tangredi argues, “International lawyers and academics have continued to agonize over how to ‘prove to the world’ that gray-zone tactics are part of the official strategies of China, Russia, or other perpetrators. They should stop their agony; the world already knows it even if some nations are too queasy about Chinese economic power (or Russian military power) to speak out. There is nothing ‘gray’ about military-like actions conducted by the vessels of an authoritarian state in which the commercial shipping and fishing fleet is owned by the government.”²⁴ I imagine that he would probably argue in the same way if he were to discuss the interference activities of authoritarian states. However, I doubt that many democracies could accept his arguments.

4. How we should respond What should we do to respond?

Since interference activities are covert, corrupt and/or coercive in nature, counterintelligence and law-enforcement efforts are indispensable to combat them. People in democratic and open societies treasure the free nature of their societies, so there are limits to what can be done. Our societies will continue to be vulnerable. It is important to keep vigilant, but there are no silver bullets. Those who go for mummies should not come back mummified.

Liberal democracies, acting both unilaterally and in concert, should take the following five measures to combat foreign interference operations:

First, we should analyze and disclose the truth about what authoritarian countries are doing in our societies. As John Garnaut argues, warning about an abstract risk to “sovereignty” is not as helpful as explaining the modus operandi. Speculation is not the same as analysis, and not as convincing as analysis. Liberal democracies will only succeed when they can do battle with evidence and reasoned argument on open terrain.²⁵ Intelligence cooperation among liberal democracies is necessary, but it is also important to share the analysis of intelligence experts with the public. Through education, the public will become resilient to the threat of interference.

Second, the public in liberal democracies must be equipped with the ability to distinguish between what is true and what is fake, so that people do not fall for propaganda of authoritarian states. Minds that are open and capable of scientific thinking must be nurtured through public education.

Third, overdependence on authoritarian countries such as China must be addressed because trade and economics are inextricably linked to security. Correcting overdependence is necessary so that our societies do not give in to economic coercion.

Fourth, we should be proud of our liberal democratic values and institutions, and work together to defend them. The United States should restore its position as the champion of liberal democracy, and if it does not, other liberal democracies should speak up for these values and institutions.

Finally, our countries should intensify efforts in the field of public diplomacy to promote liberal democratic values and to strengthen democratic governance in fragile democracies.

²⁴ Sam Tangredi, “Tax China for Gray-Zone Infractions,” *Proceedings Magazine*, May 2017, Vol. 143/5/1371, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-05/tax-china-gray-zone-infractions>.

²⁵ John Garnaut, “How China interferes.”