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From Singapore to Sweden, China's Overbearing Campaign for Influence is Forcing Countries to Resist and Recalibrate Relations with Beijing



China is not guilty of Russia's excesses, but Beijing's information and influence campaign has affected a number of countries, causing many to take countermeasures, writes **Drew THOMPSON**, former Director for China in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense and speaker at the upcoming [stars Singapore symposium 2020](#). China's campaigns range from overt diplomacy and public messaging disseminated through propaganda organs, to covert cyber exercises by specialised hackers and the "50-cent trolls" on social networking sites. Its capabilities are built into the government's vast propaganda apparatus, including the People's Liberation Army, intelligence departments, and the foreign education and culture ministries.

The influence mission is integral to the Communist Party, most notably in the United Front Work Department, which is responsible for engaging intellectuals, including overseas and ethnic Chinese. The elevation and rejuvenation of the United Front, and the formation of a Leading Small Group chaired by President Xi Jinping to oversee its work, has increased its bureaucratic capacity to extend China's influence over ethnic and overseas Chinese populations.

The United Front's efforts are clearly being felt in countries with large Chinese diaspora populations, such as Australia and Canada. Pro-China "patriotic" demonstrations and the destruction of Lennon Walls in Canada are worrying Canadians that a globally assertive and nationalistic China is impinging on Canadians' rights. A recent poll found that less than a third of Canadians have a favourable view of China.

Similar scuffles between pro-Hong Kong and pro-Beijing protesters in Australia have punctuated inappropriate displays of Chinese nationalism on foreign soil, including the

raising of a Chinese flag over an Australian police station while the Chinese national anthem was sung. Public servants paying allegiance to a foreign country is not the manifestation of a healthy bilateral relationship but, literally, a red flag that China's influence campaign has overreached and is damaging.

In Sweden, the Chinese embassy's sustained, antagonistic public messaging campaign has turned public opinion firmly against China and prompted the government to re-evaluate the relationship. Bilateral relations had been strained since 2015, when Chinese authorities abducted an ethnically Chinese Swedish citizen who ran a Hong Kong bookstore selling salacious tomes about Chinese leaders. Last year, three Chinese tourists claimed they were abused by Swedish police following a dispute over their hostel reservation. Soon after arriving in Stockholm, Chinese ambassador Gui Congyou embarked on an extensive campaign, accusing Swedish police of brutality even when a video of the incident showed police standing to one side while the tourists prostrated themselves on the pavement. Gui conducted media interviews and released almost 60 statements criticising Sweden's commitment to human rights and accusing it of tyranny, arrogance, racism and xenophobia.

Faced with this barrage of government-sanctioned accusations, and with public opinion polls showing 70 per cent of Swedes viewing China unfavourably, Sweden announced in February that it was updating its China strategy. In a memorandum to parliament last month, the government said: "The rise of China is one of the greatest global changes since the fall of the Berlin Wall." The government's first step is to establish a China-knowledge centre to enhance government coordination and information exchange, initiating a national conversation about China, and how Sweden can better protect its interests and manage China's rise.

Concern about foreign interference is not confined to Europe and North America. Singapore is particularly attuned to foreign-influence campaigns, ejecting a US embassy official in the 1980s and an academic presumed to be working for China in 2017, for interfering in domestic politics and policymaking. With ethnic Chinese making up two-thirds of Singapore's population, it is acutely aware of its vulnerabilities to United Front tactics and influence campaigns, as well as the potential of Malaysia and India to influence Singapore's other sizeable ethnic groups. It has therefore invested heavily in mechanisms and means to prevent any foreign country from influencing its population and destabilising Singapore's polity.

Its societal front line of defence is a national education curriculum and national military conscription, which emphasise a unique Singapore identity as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multiracial society. Singapore has recently taken action to address the risk of hostile information campaigns on social media and, last month, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act came into effect. A new law to counter hostile influence campaigns is also in the works. The public process to enact the laws involves political speeches, parliamentary hearings, public comment and extensive media messaging, which serve the critical function of raising public awareness. With a national election expected in the coming months, Singapore is careful to ensure the political process is inoculated against foreign influence.

China's influence campaigns are doing more harm than good. China's pressure on global businesses, including airlines, hotels, consumer goods companies and the American National Basketball Association may succeed in getting companies to revise websites and

ensor employees' personal opinions, but it is not improving the way governments and societies view China. It is forcing countries to re-examine their relationships with China, more closely analyse Chinese government intentions, and clearly identify the values being challenged by China.

This pushback on Chinese overreach will hopefully lead to a recalculation in Beijing, resulting in a more moderate approach to foreign policy. If pushback against China results in countries pursuing interest-based bilateral relations, rather than economic opportunities at the expense of their values, the result will be more stable, sustainable and productive international relations with China. China's global influence campaign could ultimately have a positive effect if it forces countries to recalibrate, and focus on themselves and what they value most, leading them to more actively resist coercion and assert their interests in engagements with China.



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