

People Fearing China is a Big Problem for Beijing

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Late one night in early September, Chinese state security agents visited two Australian journalists— one in Beijing, one in Shanghai. The two were told that they were barred from leaving the People’s Republic of China and would be summoned for interrogation the next day. Rather than wait on events, both rushed to Australia’s embassy and consulate, respectively, after which diplomats negotiated their escape: the journalists were interviewed and then allowed to fly home.

The episode was extraordinary, worthy of an espionage novel. In fact, Bill Birtles of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Michael Smith of The Australian Financial Review are normal journalists covering normal news stories. Even so, the two journalists did not trust the Chinese government, its legal system, or its police, and were not willing to risk their freedom.

Unfortunately, who can blame them? Seven Chinese police showing up at one’s door at midnight would be a bad sign at any time, and especially when relations between Beijing and Canberra were already deteriorating. The reporters could not help but reflect on the plight of Cheng Lei, the Australian (though Chinese born) anchor for CGTN television detained last month on unspecified charges about whom they were questioned.

Even more ominous was the arrest nearly two years ago of two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, by all appearances as political retaliation for Canada’s arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou on U.S. charges of violating sanctions on Iran. (Why Ottawa is effectively enforcing unilateral and widely criticized American economic penalties is another issue.) No one, in the West, anyway, credits the claim that Kovrig, a former diplomat now with the Crisis Group, and Spavor, a businessman, were spies. The charges are too implausible, the timing of detention too convenient, and hints about the connection to Meng’s case are too obvious.

Nor are Australians and journalists the only people worried about their safety and freedom in China. In July the U.S. State Department issued a formal warning: “Exercise increased caution in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) due to arbitrary enforcement of local laws for purposes other than maintaining law and order. This arbitrary enforcement may include detention and the use of exit bans.” Even before the COVID-19 pandemic halted international travel, some U.S. firms reportedly were rethinking their policies regarding executive travel to China.

These cases have personalized otherwise abstract criticism of the PRC's political system—that is, dramatically demonstrated how Beijing's restrictions on media freedom, judicial independence, and personal freedom impact normal people—and may prove to be the most powerful blow struck against China's international reputation and relations with the West. Most human rights issues mostly concern Chinese citizens. It can be hard for Americans, Australians, Canadians, and others to identify with policies, ranging from internet censorship to religious restrictions, that seem far from them.

However, it is much easier to imagine being wrongly arrested and held as a hostage to force one's government to make one concession or another. And that fear is likely to continue expanding as Beijing's relations worsen with other nations.

The U.S. appears to be descending into a new Cold War with China; Australia may not be far behind. PRC relations with Canada are dominated by what the latter sees as the official kidnapping of Kovrig and Spavor. India and China had a deadly border clash. History still mars contacts between Tokyo and Beijing. South Korea's ties with the PRC have not fully recovered from the THAAD controversy. Missteps involving COVID-19 have soured Beijing's ties with several European nations.

The result is abundant, well-fertilized, international ground for suspicion, misunderstanding, and hostility to flourish. And that was before recent events in Hong Kong elevated this challenge to a much higher level.

The national security law has imposed similarly expansive mainland restrictions and procedures on Hong Kong. The impact on liberties and guarantees taken for granted by most Westerners has been severe, with many companies located there reconsidering their future plans.

Beyond that, however, the legislation criminalizes conduct—so ill-defined that simple criticism of Chinese government policy might be deemed illegal—that occurs in foreign countries. And by foreign citizens. Among the people charged under the law is Samuel Muk-man Chu, who runs the Washington-based Hong Kong Democracy Council. Although born in Hong Kong, he gained American citizenship 25 years ago, before the legal turnover to China. Yet the PRC seeks to jail him for his activity in America.

Even analysts doing less controversial work, such as simply writing articles critical of Chinese policy, might wonder if they could face prosecution if they visit China or Hong Kong. Of course, that seems unlikely—critics the PRC are many today, and simply listing them all would be quite a chore. Nevertheless, anyone obviously could be charged. A law already widely dismissed in the West as an offensive over-reach also has personalized human rights concerns, inflaming antagonism toward increasingly harsh Chinese policies.

Of course, Beijing is going to set the PRC's course and make decisions based on its judgments, not the opinions of foreign nations and peoples. Nevertheless, the impact of foreign opinion should still matter to Chinese officials.

There is a virtual cascade of anti-Chinese sentiment in many Western nations, with complaints in different areas building on one another. The commercial relationship once was the bedrock for

relations between many nations and the PRC. Controversy now increasingly dominates this area. As China's role in sensitive industries has grown, so have security worries. Military confrontations and clashes have illustrated Beijing's new international aggressiveness.

Now Chinese missteps have brought home human rights to Westerners who might not have thought that much about the issue in the past. Those who did care before have become more passionate.

If the PRC hopes to reverse the rapid decline in relations with Western states, it should address the negative impact of abusive laws and procedures on its international reputation. When the first inclination of visitors is to race home when contacted by the police, it is apparent that Beijing's reputation has collapsed. And that China is losing much of the soft power that it once enjoyed.

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