

Essex Caller

WH Sees Chinese Election Meddling; Others See No Red Flags

Sally Persons

November 24, 2018

President Trump caused ripples at the United Nations Security Council last month when he singled out a new adversary that he said is engaged in a multi-pronged assault on American democracy. China, the president declared, “has been attempting to interfere in our upcoming 2018 election.” The goal of the Chinese, Trump asserted, is undermining his administration, the Republican Party, and the United States as a whole.

“They do not want me or us to win because I am the first president ever to challenge China on trade” he said. “And we are winning on trade. We are winning at every level. We don’t want them to meddle or interfere in our upcoming election.”

By way of supporting evidence, Trump pointed to the China Daily, a newspaper backed by the Chinese Communist Party, which ran a paid supplement in the Des Moines Register, Iowa’s largest newspaper. Since then, several administration officials have echoed Trump’s sentiments. In a speech devoted to suspected Chinese interference, Vice President Mike Pence said that U.S. intelligence officials have told him that Russia’s 2016 activity “pales in comparison to what China is doing across this country.”

“Beijing has mobilized covert actors, front groups and propaganda outlets to shift Americans’ perception of Chinese policies,” Pence said. He pointed to China’s targeted industries in the tariff war as evidence it is trying to influence the midterm races. “By one estimate, more than 80 percent of U.S. counties targeted by China voted for President Trump and I in 2016; now China wants to turn these voters against our administration.”

Although China Daily regularly subsidizes paid content inserts in The Washington Post, the president and vice president saw the incursion into Midwest media as a new kind of provocation. “Last week, the Chinese government paid to have a multipage supplement inserted into the Des Moines Register — the paper of record of the home state of our ambassador to China, and a pivotal state in 2018 and 2020,” said Pence. “The supplement, designed to look like the news articles, cast our trade policies as reckless and harmful to Iowans.”

Not everyone, however, equates China’s overt attempts to sway American public opinion with the kind of covert dirty tricks on social media that the Russians exploited in 2016.

“They are claiming interference and what we’re seeing is influence,” said Rush Doshi, a fellow at the Brookings Institution specializing in China and the Indo-Pacific. “The bright line is between that kind of stuff and actually targeting election structures.”

Another critic took aim at Pence’s claims, saying the vice president should have provided more concrete examples to make such an incendiary allegation. “I haven’t seen any public reporting

indicating they've moved into Russian-style electoral interference," said Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute. "That doesn't mean it's necessarily untrue — the intelligence agencies may well be seeing things private sector observers aren't — but Pence's remarks were pretty thin on specifics."

Others say that parsing the difference between influencing and interfering is an important exercise. Isaac Stone Fish, senior fellow at the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, said that despite personal disagreements with aspects of the administration's policy on China, he thought Pence's speech was well delivered and addressed the Chinese Communist Party's longer-term strategy of manipulating U.S. institutions.

"I think the more worrying meddling is the way that the Communist Party has been able to co-opt some American officials, universities and Hollywood and gotten them to speak less critically [on the Chinese government]," said Fish.

The problem, as he sees it, has to do with openness. "For me, the China Daily propaganda is more of an example of influence or attempted influence. It's transparent. They put it in a newspaper that people read," Fish said. He explained that interference can be seen through Chinese officials meeting with American business leaders to try and push for policies in the U.S. that their government supports. "Interference sounds like a more mature word for meddling," Fish said.

As Americans head to the polls next month, U.S. officials say they are monitoring the Chinese situation but add that they have no evidence of actual election hacking or damage to voting machines — yet. "We currently have no indication that a foreign adversary intends to disrupt our election infrastructure," said Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen at a Washington Post event on cybersecurity last week. "But ... we know they have the capability and we know they have the will. So we're constantly on alert."

One key National Security Agency adviser said this week that any specific information the government does have about election tampering attempts will not be publicly released at this point. "Anything we do see ... right before the elections we need to keep in government channels and make sure we can address those in safe and responsible ways," said Rob Joyce, cybersecurity expert at the NSA. Speaking at an event on cybersecurity co-hosted by RealClearPolitics, Joyce added that the agency is "worrying about the safety and security of the election" and echoed Nielsen's comments that China is among those concerns.

As the U.S. tries to handle the pending Chinese situation, Australia's experience could serve as a much-needed warning. late last year about China's attempts to gain power over Australian officials, Washington Post columnist Josh Rogin noted that Australia, New Zealand, and even Canada "have been rocked" by Chinese-sponsored efforts to corrupt their politicians, universities, think tanks and businesses. "U.S. political and thought leaders are just beginning to understand the problem and come together to devise responses," he added.

Clive Hamilton, an ethics professor at Charles Sturt University in Australia, said the problem has become so rampant that the Aussie government passed legislation on foreign influencers. In a for Foreign Affairs magazine, he wrote, "The new legislation follows extensive news reporting exposing the activities of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, whose

brief is ‘to make the foreign serve China’ and which is actively recruiting agents of influence among Australia’s elites and using them to promote favorable views of China.”

Speaking about the U.S., Hamilton said that the Chinese Communist Party — or CCP — is making similar efforts as those seen in Australia but cautioned against confusing those attempts with the Russian meddling in the 2016 election. “The Trump/Pence claim does risk confusing China and Russia in the public mind, as the two operate very differently,” Hamilton told RCP. “One aims for long-term control. The other, short-term disruption.”

China — like Russia — has denied any meddling in U.S. domestic affairs. At the U.N. Security Council meeting, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he would not stand for such allegations. “We did not and will not interfere in any country’s domestic affairs,” he said. “We refuse to accept any unwarranted accusations against China.”