

A tit for tat with no end point

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A get-tough policy on China with no apparent goal has left Australia as the only developed country with no media representation in the country.

As Australia descends further into a costly and increasingly futile tit-for-tat fight with China, one is reminded of the Black Knight in the 1975 Arthurian spoof *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Having lost all his limbs in a sword fight and with blood spurting from his wounds, the torso of the Black Knight shouts to the departing King Arthur: "Chicken! ... Come back here and take what's coming to you."

The slapstick, Keystone Cops-like episode of the [withdrawal of two Australian journalists](#) is the latest round. What appears to be co-ordinated, deliberately clumsy appearances by police at the journalists' respective apartments in Beijing and Shanghai bear no resemblance to the stealthy, well-honed skills of the security agencies that ["disappeared" Australian news anchor Cheng Lei](#).

In Cheng's case it was at least 48 hours before friends began noticing that she had dropped out of WeChat. It was sometime later that the Australian embassy, which had begun making inquiries, was advised of her detention. The seriousness of her situation is underlined by the secrecy of how authorities have and continue to deal with her case. But more on Cheng Lei later.

Turning up uninvited at midnight at a farewell party for one of the journalists is hardly the way politically sensitive arrests are made in China, especially when an audience of potential witnesses is present. Nor is requesting the "person of interest" to provide the police with a telephone number, or permitting them to escape to an Australian diplomatic mission. China is a surveillance state.

The buffoonery is but one of the unexplained aspects of these events. But it would seem a highly publicised "escape" from China was the intention. We can only speculate as to why.

The journalists confirm the embassy had warned them more than a week earlier that they should leave China, as they might be detained. If the concern was motivated by Cheng's detention, then it is a puzzle why the embassy appears to have waited two weeks to warn them.

Rumours have been circulating in parts of the Chinese community in Sydney for some weeks that at the time of the [raids on NSW upper house member Shaoquett Moselmane](#), in late June, ASIO had also raided the Sydney premises of mainland China media representatives in Australia. The Chinese journalists were warned against making any public comment.

On Tuesday evening in Beijing, the officially sanctioned English-language *Global Times* and the government wire service Xinhua [both ran stories](#) on the ASIO raids. Xinhua reported that journalists were questioned for "several hours" and digital devices and notebooks were seized. *Global Times* claimed that Australia was "waging an intensifying espionage offensive against China".

Whatever the truth, and how it relates to the Chinese police visiting Australian journalists, it is all part of the escalating tit-for-tat retaliation from both sides for slights, real or imagined.

Following the furious reaction from Beijing to Scott Morrison's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, Canberra decided to hit back. Its provocations were met with retaliation.

Further tightening of foreign investment rules, increased spending on data and cyber security, and ramped up naval exercises in the South China Sea, each pointedly directed at China, have followed Beijing's threats to trade.

Late last month, the Treasurer [blocked the takeover](#) of a Japanese-owned dairy company, Lion Nathan, by Chinese-owned Mengniu on "national interest" grounds. Read national security. It is also intriguing that not only the nationality of an owner of cows is a risk, but that cows have become strategic assets.

The next day, China's deputy ambassador gave what was seen as a largely conciliatory [speech at the National Press Club](#). The following day, the Prime Minister announced a clumsy policy to [review all agreements states and universities have made with foreign powers](#), and to "rip them up" if they are not in the national interest.

Although aimed primarily at Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews and his defiance of Canberra in signing an inconsequential, non-binding memorandum of understanding on Belt and Road co-operation, the announcement was also calculated to hit back at China.

At the time, the government knew that Cheng Lei had disappeared – and, if this week's Chinese media reports are correct, that ASIO had been authorised to raid China's media representatives in Australia.

We now await the Australian government's next act of retaliation. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Marise Payne has needlessly warned that all Australians in China are at risk. It is not hard to imagine how Beijing will react.

The trouble with the simple-minded "let's get tough on China approach" is that it is a policy without any strategy, a triumph of tactics. The end point is not known. Nor when victory will be declared – or when the cost of pursuing tit for tat becomes so heavy that a change of course becomes inevitable.

Unfortunately, Australia these days has a complaisant and supine opposition that avoids challenging the government or asking questions about ASIO's behaviour and the spreading secrecy that surrounds its activities.

Other Australian journalists are working for foreign agencies in China. Australia, however, is now the only developed country that has none of its own news networks present. Most other countries find ways to manage China's rise without harming their own interests. Australia is still to discover how.

As for Cheng Lei, *Global Times* has hinted darkly that her detention has something to do with national security. This is the kind of claim often made while investigations are continuing. It is best for now to treat Cheng's situation and the flight of the Australian journalists as separate, and not part of the tit for tat. But Cheng's circumstances are not helped by the poisonous state of bilateral relations.

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