

Australian Chinese trapped between Beijing bullies and Canberra spooks

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Greater transparency about Australia's counter foreign influence activities is needed to protect people of Chinese heritage who fear being targeted by security agencies for speaking about China.

Australia's counter foreign interference activities are unnecessarily shrouded in secrecy. This sends a chill through Chinese communities in Australia because of fears they may be targeted. Similarly, there is too little public information about the effectiveness of Australia's CFI strategy in assisting people in Australia who are targeted by authoritarian regimes such as the Communist Party of China.

Increased CFI transparency would allow the public to judge the effectiveness of such actions. It would also better protect people of Chinese heritage who are concerned about security overreach. Particularly since the mid-1990s, AUSMIN has functioned as the alliance's clearing house, providing a regular focal point for the work of officials on both sides of the Pacific in shaping the Australian-American strategic partnership. The AUSMIN meeting agenda is developed in the months leading up to the talks. When the principals get together, they discuss and sign off on agreements and arrangements long in the making. It is not unusual for major announcements to be made at a joint press conference after the meeting, signalling significant evolutions of the alliance.

ASIO's decision to cancel the visas of two scholars from the People's Republic of China, Chen Hong and Li Jianjun, due to political interference concerns was questionable. The investigation needs to run its course and it is possible that more concrete information will come to light.

But, as I argue in a recent China Matters policy brief, the Communist Party of China has failed to influence major Australian policy decisions. Almost every major federal policy decision has gone against the PRC's preferred position. As such, even if Chen and Li had been seeking to unduly influence Australian politics, they would not have been successful. The decision to cancel their visas should have been postponed until more evidence was made public by ASIO.

It is important these decisions are explained to the public with credible evidence. Otherwise the Australian public, including individuals in Australia of Chinese heritage, are left wondering what speech or acts would warrant a visa cancellation or constitute foreign interference.

So far, we know that Chen and Li were in the same WeChat group as Shaoquett Moselmane and John Zhang (Moselmane's former staffer and a likely target of the investigation). Chen and Li had publicly said positive things about the CPC and negative things about the Australian government. Zhang had interactions with people from the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Australia. None of this by itself constitutes undue interference.

Plenty of people in this country agree with some or much of what the CPC has done over the past 40 years. They are entitled to express those opinions and to try to influence government. This is normal in a democracy.

Members of Chinese communities in Australia often feel trapped between CPC intimidation and accusations that they are CPC stooges if they say anything positive about the Party publicly. The opacity of the recent ASIO decision to cancel two scholars' visas will exacerbate this.

The attention on covert political interference and political influence takes focus away from the biggest problem of CPC interference – the successful efforts of the Party to silence people in Australia, predominantly those with links to the PRC.

People who face this intimidation rarely report it to authorities. As part of the China Matters brief, I interviewed over 30 people who claimed to be victims of CPC intimidation. Only three had reported it to authorities. The most-stated reason for this was a belief that the Australian government could not protect the victim's family in the PRC. This is a valid concern and there is little that the Australian government can do about it.

This is a difficult problem to fix, but there are small steps Australia can undertake to improve the situation. The government could provide an encrypted portal for victims to report foreign interference. The national security hotline is currently an unencrypted line.

Increased reporting of crimes will not necessarily lead to convictions under the Espionage and Foreign Interference Act because the burden of proof is high. But it would identify individuals who need protection.

The willingness of victims to speak to the author but not with any authorities is telling. Civil society needs to play a greater role to increase transparency and understanding of the scale of foreign interference. Security concerns mean that the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator in Home Affairs cannot publicise much of its work, which makes it ill-suited to increasing transparency on interference.

A Foreign Interference Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission could do this. Victims of CPC coercion in this country continue to be intimidated. The Commissioner could track the experience of the victims of foreign interference.

All these efforts would provide transparency on the experience of the victims which is just as important as transparency on the actions of authorities. Australia needs to strive for a situation in which all those who live here feel free to speak about the PRC regardless of their views.

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