Sunlight v subversion

What to do about China's "sharp power"

China is manipulating decision-makers in Western democracies. The best defence is transparency

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WHEN a rising power challenges an incumbent one, war often follows. That prospect, known as the Thucydides trap after the Greek historian who first described it, looms over relations between China and the West, particularly America. So, increasingly, does a more insidious confrontation. Even if China does not seek to conquer foreign lands, many people fear that it seeks to conquer foreign minds.

Influencing the influencers

Like many countries, China has long tried to use visas, grants, investments and culture to pursue its interests. But its actions have recently grown more intimidating and encompassing. Its sharp power has a series of interlocking components: subversion, bullying and pressure, which combine to promote self-censorship. For China, the ultimate prize is pre-emptive kowtowing by those whom it has not approached, but who nonetheless fear losing funding, access or influence.

China has a history of spying on its diaspora, but the subversion has spread. In Australia and New Zealand Chinese money is alleged to have bought influence in politics, with party donations or payments to individual politicians. This week's complaint from German intelligence said that China was using the LinkedIn business network to ensnare politicians and government officials, by having people posing as recruiters and think-tankers and offering free trips.

Bullying has also taken on a new menace. Sometimes the message is blatant, as when China punished Norway economically for awarding a Nobel peace prize to a Chinese pro-democracy activist. More often, as when critics of China are not included in speaker line-ups at conferences, or academics avoid study of topics that China deems sensitive, individual cases seem small and the role of officials is

However, if China were being more truthful, it would point out that its desire for influence is what happens when countries become powerful.

China has a lot more at stake outside its borders today than it did. Some 10m Chinese have moved abroad since 1978. It worries that they will pick up democratic habits from foreigners and infect China itself. Separately, Chinese companies are investing in rich countries, including in resources, strategic infrastructure and farmland. China's navy can project power far from home. Its government frets that its poor image abroad will do it harm. And as the rising superpower, China has an appetite to shape the rules of global engagement—rules created largely by America and western Europe and routinely invoked by them to justify their own actions.

To ensure China's rise is peaceful, the West needs to make room for China's ambition. But that does not mean anything goes. Open societies ignore China's sharp power at their peril.

Part of their defence should be practical. Counter-intelligence, the law and an independent media are the best protection against subversion. All three need Chinese speakers who grasp the connection between politics and commerce in China. The Chinese Communist Party suppresses free expression, open debate and