

China's growing economic clout

Written by Sam Sky Wild

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Announcements by the US' three biggest airlines that they are to list Taiwan as part of China might have registered as a tiny blip on the news radar, but some experts say that it represents efforts by Chinese authorities to assert control over the de facto island state.

Forty-four other airlines — including British Airways, Lufthansa and Qantas — also complied with China's called-for changes, prompting American Airlines to respond: "Air travel is a global business and we abide by the rules in countries where we operate."

Taiwan has for years grappled with China's growing business power, while several other "rebel regions" have increasingly had to accommodate the sharper edge of this economic reality: From Tibet to Xinjiang, Macau to Hong Kong and elsewhere within China's mosaic of regions, Chinese commercial strength is wielded with increasing effect.

"Sadly, businesses around the world are giving in too easily to China's increasing demands and in Tibet — replete with its atrocious track record on human rights — there are dangerous precedents," Free Tibet campaigns and communications manager John Jones said. "The more China's economy permeates the rest of the world, the more they are encouraging other countries to ignore inconvenient realities about life within China's borders. Today it's Tibet, tomorrow it's Hong Kong and then who knows where?"

There are significant differences in the quality of life and freedoms enjoyed among the people who China claims to rule. For example, Hong Kongers have unfettered access to the Internet, while an estimated 50,000 censors in China screen online content for most of the rest of its 1.4 billion citizens.

However, across China and the regions that it either occupies or borders, Beijing's financial muscle is arguably being flexed and Taiwan is increasingly locked in this vice-like grip.

"China has been trying to squeeze Taiwan's international space for decades. At times the process seems to slow down or become less visible, but it is a constant effort," said Dafydd Fell, director of the Centre of Taiwan Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

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While Hong Kong remains a special administrative region of China, there are a growing number within the territory who fear for its semi-autonomous status.

“Reporters, either consciously or unconsciously, may avoid sensitive topics ... so as not to upset media owners with business interests in the mainland. Whilst there is no top-down censorship in Hong Kong, self-censorship is a worrying trend. Hong Kong may lose its status as a beacon of press freedom in the region,” Hong Kong Free Press editor-in-chief Tom Grundy said as he explained that hard-won freedoms are feeling the heat.

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th National Congress in November last year marked Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) fifth year in power. He used the event to issue veiled threats against those seeking to separate from China: “We will never allow anyone, any organization or any political party at any time or in any form to separate any part of Chinese territory from China... We will resolutely safeguard the national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

Xi's consolidated power base — further fortified by the decision allowing him to remain in office indefinitely — has not gone unobserved, with global agencies continuing to raise the alarm.

A European Parliamentary delegation in June last year said that it “remains concerned by the Chinese government's continued efforts to silence civil society... Constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association are systematically violated.”

In 2016, the British Conservative Party published a highly critical report titled *The Darkest Hour*, which listed key failings in China's human rights track record, including arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture.

As Britain struggles to hammer out post-Brexit trade deals, human rights advocates are expressing increasing concern over Beijing's economic influence, including British lawmaker Tim Loughton, who just before the fateful UK referendum said: “People should not underestimate the tentacles that China extends throughout the world.”

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Tibet has suffered more than most, many observers have said, pointing to Xi's infrastructure of repression with tighter border controls, intense surveillance and floods of security personnel that are arguably turning Tibet into a vast open-air prison.

In Xi's first two years in power, Human Rights Watch recorded 479 cases of individuals being detained or tried for political expression or criticism of government policy.

"While there might be moments where there's a relative relaxing of restrictions in one area, overall, the situation [in Tibet] is extremely repressive," said John Powers, a research professor at Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute. "The level of surveillance, the level of Chinese presence has grown exponentially."

Adding his personal testimony to the list of those criticizing Beijing's Tibet policy is Tibetan activist and filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen, who escaped to the US in January.

China's growing economic strength has negatively affected the lives of ordinary Tibetans, he said.

"As China has grown more economically and politically powerful, support [for Tibetans] has waned," he said. "Tibetans are not bargaining chips to appease an ascendant China."

Concerns that China's growing financial clout is increasingly being wielded to further its domestic grip on power are not limited to the confines of Tibet.

"The CCP has been firm in its stance on Taiwan and it has been seemingly more aggressive to ensure that businesses and foreign actors operating in China align themselves to official policy. This may be due ... to the fact that China has more economic power now," University of Alberta political science professor Reza Hasmath said.

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China's defense of its territorial claims has taken many commercial scalps: US clothing company GAP in May issued an apology for selling T-shirts with a map of China that did not show Taiwan and other disputed territories; the Chinese operation of Japanese retail giant Muji was fined in April by Chinese authorities for listing Taiwan as a nation on its packaging; the global hotel chain Marriott in January faced suspension of its China-based cyber operations after it listed Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Macau as separate national entities in a customer questionnaire.

However, China's soft power is not limited to corporate entities. In September last year, Springer Nature, a German publishing group whose output includes leading periodicals Nature and Scientific American, had "blocked access to at least 1,000 academic articles in China that mention subjects deemed sensitive by Beijing, including Taiwan, Tibet and Hong Kong."

The UK-based Cambridge University Press, a publishing facility connected with a university that is heavily reliant on fee-paying Chinese students, followed suit.

Campaigning organizations, including the London-based group Free Tibet, are concerned that the long-term effects of China's soft power mission are helping to remove contested areas such as Tibet from the global news radar.

Free Tibet's research showed that 6 percent of Canadians believe Tibet to be a mountain in Asia, with the same number in the UK thinking that Tibet is an Asian city, while two in five Americans are unsure what kind of government controls Tibet, meaning that they do not realize that Tibetans live under military rule.

"This research proves again that knowledge is power," Jones said. "By enforcing a lock-down on the flow of information from Tibet, China is seeking to choke off global support for the region. Yet, as we have seen, where information is available, people become concerned and that, in turn, leads to action."

Concerns about China's machinations are not limited to non-governmental organizations. In an interview with Agence France-Presse on June 25, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) urged the international community to counter China's emboldened stance, which she called a global threat to democracy.

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“This is not just Taiwan’s challenge, it is a challenge for the region and the world as a whole, because today it’s Taiwan, but tomorrow it may be any other country that will have to face the expansion of China’s influence,” she said.

Beijing’s financial influence remains a powerful weapon in its armory of soft power and many of those living within or close to China’s borders are mulling what a future looks like with such power on the prowl.

Airlines might have faced unwanted commercial turbulence over the rebranding of Taiwan as a region of China, but with Taiwan’s future far from certain, the fallout from this decision appears far from over.

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