

With the polls consistently favoring a second-term majority government for President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), it was inevitable that China would seek to ramp up its disinformation campaign with a piece of dramatic news designed to sway voters ahead of tomorrow's elections.

In a joint report on Wednesday, Australia's The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald revealed Beijing's plan — a scheme that appears to have backfired.

The plot centered around William Wang Liqiang (王立强), a “middleman” working with Chinese intelligence operatives, who defected to Australia last year and in November went public with explosive allegations of a Chinese espionage ring interfering in the domestic politics of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Australia.

Speaking to Australian media, Wang claimed that Chinese spies had infiltrated Taiwanese media, temples and grassroots organizations as part of a major operation to meddle with Taiwan's democracy, including local elections in November 2018 — which saw the surprise election of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) politician Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) as Kaohsiung mayor.

Wang claimed to have helped funnel campaign donations to Han's mayoral campaign and described his election as a “huge win” and a “glorious record” for his team. Han has denied receiving funds from China.

Wang said that before he defected, he was assigned to travel to Taiwan to work on unseating Tsai. Beijing dismissed all of Wang's claims, including that he was a Chinese spy, claiming that he was a fugitive on the run from the police.

The newspapers revealed that KMT Deputy Secretary-General Alex Tsai (蔡正元) and a Chinese businessman named Sun Tianqun (孙天群) contacted Wang over the Christmas holiday. Using messaging apps, Alex Tsai and Sun attempted to coerce Wang into filming, and then releasing online, a prepared video statement in which he would have retracted all of his previous allegations and claimed that the DPP had offered him a large sum of money to spread lies about Chinese espionage in Taiwan.

Possible interference exposed

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Sources from within the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation shared screenshots of the messages with the newspapers, which show a series of threats and inducements made to Wang, beginning on Dec. 24. The messages appear to include Alex Tsai offering Wang safe passage to Taiwan, arranged by the KMT, while Sun threatened Wang with extradition to China and the punishment of his family if he failed to cooperate.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) is treating the alleged threats to Wang seriously and has launched an investigation. The Central News Agency has also obtained a screenshot of the messages, which appear to show Alex Tsai and Sun discussing how to deal with Wang.

Alex Tsai yesterday held a news conference during which he released a video conversation with Wang, denied threatening him and claimed that the DPP had offered Wang a “large sum of money,” but did not provide evidence to substantiate the claim.

Meanwhile, Deputy Minister of Justice Chen Ming-tang (陳明堂) confirmed that he has received a letter from the AFP requesting information on Alex Tsai.

China, aided by Alex Tsai, appears to have been trying to falsely implicate the DPP in a bribery scandal to influence the outcome of tomorrow’s elections. This is serious stuff.

The government should instruct Taiwan’s security agencies to share all available intelligence, including Alex Tsai’s telephone records, with the AFP to assist with their investigation.

If the allegations turn out to be true, it constitutes a serious attempt at election interference by Beijing and treasonous behavior by at least one member of the KMT.

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