

Beijing's sharp power is blunted

Written by Liberty Times Editorial
Wednesday, 23 October 2019 05:16

The past few years have seen China chalk up successes overseas with its persistent use of sharp power. With the exception of isolated examples within its own territories, such as the challenges it faces in Hong Kong, China is using its economic clout to achieve its ends. Beijing continues attempts to penetrate Taiwan and Western societies with its “united front” tactics and does little to hide the scale of its hegemonic ambition.

That said, China's attempts to export its totalitarian model beyond its borders have been frustrated, the most notable examples being a row with the NBA and trade talks with the US. China's hard-headed approach — essentially “go with us or go home” — has been blunted.

These examples might be rare exceptions of China's sharp power being frustrated, but they do at least suggest that the power of its nascent digital totalitarianism is being challenged. This is something worth keeping an eye on.

The term sharp power refers to the approach by which an authoritarian state employs an invasive and suppressive foreign relations policy to project its power in a democratic country. Crucially, a dictatorship does not seek to win the target nation's “hearts and minds,” as in the case of soft power, but aims to distort information that the target nation has access to, to manipulate the target audience.

The Economist first used the term sharp power in late 2017 to describe China's increasing international influence, referring to its tactics of using economic incentives and various platforms to get its own way with other countries.

Taiwan, which neighbors China and is under its political and economic influence, is used to Beijing's political manipulations to infiltrate the nation and push through its agenda here, and Australia has also long been aware of China's sharp power tactics.

Australian academic Clive Hamilton warns in his book *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* that Australia is in danger of becoming a puppet state of China.

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The expansion of China's sharp power has become an important focus of geopolitics.

China's sharp power uses economic power as a weapon and the ammunition has been supplied by the results of four decades of economic development. Nobody would deny that China's success in lifting its people out of poverty has been a great achievement, but this economic development has been accompanied by a political regression, not political reform.

Political control is more stringent than before, especially since Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) assumed the helm, and China, with the help of a strong economy and technological advances, has developed into a digital totalitarian system the like of which the world has never seen.

The humiliation that Western powers subjected China to in the past century gave rise to a profound inferiority complex. Now that China has become powerful, this sense of inferiority has been transformed into an exaggerated sense of superiority leading to an aspiration of achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Coupled with the nationalism of the "Chinese dream" and the iron-fisted rule of the Chinese Communist Party, this has brought about the birth of a new communist Chinese empire.

Beijing's economic development strategy has been to follow an original equipment manufacturing contract model for overseas companies — allowing China to become the world's second-largest economy — and then to entice other countries with this economic power and the Belt and Road Initiative bind them in debt-trap diplomacy, ultimately subjugating them.

These countries, on pain of the withdrawal of the economic assistance or the implementation of other economic sanctions, are forbidden to question China's hegemonic bearing and totalitarian values.

Beijing does not tolerate other countries — neither officials nor private citizens — commenting on its actions in the colonized territories of Tibet or Xinjiang, its implementation of the "one country, two systems" model in Hong Kong and Macau, or its suppressive and isolationist

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policies in regard to Taiwan. Instead, everyone is expected to slavishly accept and welcome the notion of the "great unification of the Chinese nation."

The emerging picture shows how China's sharp power works only when economics and politics intersect, where economics is subordinate to the political agenda.

As far as the Chinese communists are concerned, there is no way to separate economics from politics, despite what some politicians in Taiwan would like to believe, and indeed the very opposite is true: The closer a country is tied to the Chinese economy, the more profoundly it is bound to China politically, resulting in the country finding it impossible to extricate itself from China and becoming a vassal of the Chinese empire.

China's merciless implementation of sharp power had thus far been unstoppable, like a tank trundling over everything hapless enough to be in its path, but it seems to have met its match with the NBA issue and the trade dispute with the US. Beijing cannot simply trundle over the regulations and value systems of the civilized world.

The NBA is essentially a commercial venture, an industry based on the performance of professional athletes. It can attract so many fans and get them to spend so much of their hard-earned cash because of the players' high level of skill.

The fortunes of the industry rest largely on the skill displayed in the games. Political power and the narrow preoccupations of nationalistic fervor do not play a dominant role in this.

At the same time, the tensions between the US and China over trade entails a clash between free trade and protectionism. In the midst of this, China represents a country founded on totalitarianism, whereas the US represents a nation founded on a democratic government and a market economy.

As a result, the minute that Beijing gets its way over the NBA issue or Washington retreats from its demands in the trade row, democratic governments and free markets will face a crisis.

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Fortunately, the events that have frustrated China in its use of sharp power show that democratic freedoms and the market economy are staging a spirited counterattack against China and its model of digital totalitarianism.

This comes both as a stern rebuke against Taiwanese politicians intent on giving China a pass, who still feel it appropriate to show Beijing goodwill, and as a premonition that China's communist march is coming to an end.

Translated by Paul Cooper

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2019/10/23](#)