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Countering Foreign Influence: What's at Stake?

By Leong Chan-Hoong

SYNOPSIS

Singapore is a prized target in great power rivalry. It stands to suffer serious collateral damage in terms of its social cohesion if the city-state does not manage the challenges methodically and strategically. Recent cases have shown how foreign actors have attempted to use Singapore to advance their own selfish interests.

COMMENTARY

It was *deja vu* on July 19 when the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) directed all major social media platforms to [block a network of 95 accounts](#) that accused Singapore of being a vassal state of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Some may see this as an overreaction, but the issue is clear: Singapore is once again being dragged into the game of superpower rivalry, and if it doesn't stand up for itself, this could erode its multiracial fabric.

In the latest instance, it has been reported that the network put up some 120 posts between April 17 and May 10, 2024, alleging that China was involved in the selection of Singapore's fourth-generation leaders. This is in addition to years of hostile misinformation on how Singapore advances the interests of CPC leaders as a financial gateway to the world.

According to the Singapore authorities, all the posts [are linked to Guo Wengui](#), a self-exiled Chinese businessman in the United States of America (US), a staunch critic of China's leadership, and a convicted fraudster. Guo is also a close associate of the right-wing movement in the US and is on a crusade to overturn the communist government in the People's Republic of China.

For Guo, Singapore was just a sound bite to hurl at China. However, such allegations have repercussions for the public discourse in the city-state, and the Singapore government has no choice but to dispel them. This is not the first time it has been roped into this contest.

Six months ago, Mr Philip Chan Man Ping, a Hong Kong-born naturalised Singapore citizen, was designated by Singapore's MHA as a politically significant person under Singapore's foreign interference law, known as the [Foreign Interference \(Countermeasures\) Act, or Fica](#). Mr Chan is said to be susceptible to the influence of foreign entities and willing to advance their interests at Singapore's expense.

A week before the notice was served on Mr Chan, the US Congress interrogated Chinese-owned social media giant TikTok and its Singaporean chief executive, Chew Shou Zi and accused them of espionage.

Despite Mr Chew being a Singaporean, nationalist lawmakers in the US Congress sought to paint him as an agent of the CPC. They were cynically trying to exploit the stereotype that Mr Chew's ethnicity could influence his allegiance.

Collateral Damage

Some are asking: Why is Singapore acting so strongly against Guo, who doesn't even live in the city-state? After all, Singapore is just a tool in his rhetoric to undermine China's government.

Guo was neither the first nor the last Chinese dissident to seek to cast aspersions on Beijing by suggesting it has influence over Singapore. However, given its multiracial population, that is precisely the reason Singapore has to make it clear that it is not in thrall with China.

Singapore is a regional business hub in Southeast Asia. It is reputed for its integrity and its principled position in international affairs. That is why it has become a prized target in the chess game between Beijing and Washington. It could be the collateral damage in the domestic and geopolitical agenda of the great powers. Should these foreign interferences succeed, the multiracial ties and social cohesion in Singapore will be eroded.

The foreign powers are betting that tribal identity – be that race or religion – is a weak link in Singapore's social fabric.

The idea that China plays a deciding role in Singapore's politics can undermine the confidence that Singaporeans have as a multicultural society, and their sense of security as a sovereign state will evaporate.

What Can Singapore Do?

Fica does not prohibit the circulation of fabricated social media posts outside Singapore. So how can the Republic change the perspectives of the international audience when such mischievous posts seek to paint the city-state in a certain way?

Quite simply, Singapore cannot change the external environment. But it can calibrate the way its government respond to the corrosive and polarising discourse in two ways.

First, Singapore should continue to deepen the shared experiences among its multiracial and multi-religious communities, and this includes strengthening the positive social norms practised in its diverse society.

Singaporeans can learn from Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, which have consistently ranked high on social cohesion. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Cohesion Radar, this sense of community can be attributed to active civic participation, support for egalitarian values and mutual respect for diversity. More importantly, the robust social fabric has helped the Scandinavian states cope with the geopolitical uncertainties in Europe during the Cold War and beyond.

Second, Singaporeans should foster a principled but dispassionate approach when thinking about regional conflicts, keeping in mind the collective interest of Singaporeans. This is particularly so in situations where the acrimony is deep and compounded by a complex history.

Singaporeans may feel for the predicament of those beyond their national borders with whom they share a similar faith and ethnicity. But their own small size and diverse population mix make them vulnerable to fault lines. Singaporeans need to remember this.

A Part of National Defence

Beyond traditional military prowess and diplomacy, many policymakers now see social cohesion as an integral component of their respective national defence and security.

The conflict in Europe, the Gaza war, and the ongoing US-China geopolitical contest have encouraged various sides in government and outside government to sow civic discord and anxiety in their rivals and use these as weapons.

State actors now compete not just on military terms but also target the social compact, trying to exploit racial and religious divisions among their rivals. Singapore is not immune to such designs. The threat has been amplified by advances in communication technology.

Singaporeans need to have a clear appreciation of their limitations as a multicultural society and a small and open global city-state. Awareness of the importance of social cohesion will help Singaporeans locate their place in the world, even amid great power competition, and to manage the challenges and opportunities strategically.

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