

China playing power politics with Canada

Two days after warning Canada of “grave consequences” if it did not immediately release Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer (CFO) of China’s tech giant Huawei and daughter of its founder, China arrested two Canadians.

Last Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang confirmed that Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor had been arrested on December 10 and were being investigated for “activities that harm China’s state security.”

Asked whether the detention of Kovrig, a former diplomat, and Spavor, a businessman, was related to, or retaliation for, Canada’s arrest of Meng Wanzhou, Kang neither confirmed nor denied it.

A day earlier, when asked what the connection was between the detention of Kovrig in China and that of Meng in Canada, the same spokesman didn’t directly answer the question either. Instead, he said: “Our attitude on this case is very clear. The Canadian side should correct its mistakes and release Ms Meng Wanzhou immediately.”

On Kovrig, he added, “I have no information to offer.”

But for many observers, including two former Canadian ambassadors to China, their arrests were a direct reaction to Meng’s detention in Vancouver on December 1. Indeed, the timing of their arrests, China’s warnings as well as its other comments and actions make people rightly believe that its detention of the two Canadians is Beijing’s retaliation against Ottawa’s arrest of Meng.

In what was called Beijing’s “tit-for-tat play to put pressure on overseas rivals,” in 2014 China arrested a Canadian couple, Kevin and Julia Garratt, on charges of spying in response to Canada’s arrest of Su Bin, a Chinese businessman charged with stealing US fighter-jet secrets. Garratt himself and others now believe Kovrig’s arrest was retaliation for Meng’s detention.

The 46-year-old CFO was detained at the request of US authorities who accused her of bank fraud related to violating sanctions against trade with

Iran. On December 11, she was granted bail of C\$10 million (US\$7.5 million) while awaiting a decision on whether she will be extradited to the US.

Huawei is seen as the symbol of China's technological achievements as well as its ambitions to be a global tech powerhouse. As such, for the Chinese, as noted by the state-run Global Times, Meng's arrest was a political plot by the US to stifle the tech giant and, ultimately, to contain China's rise.

In an opinion piece in The Globe and Mail on December 13, the Chinese ambassador to Canada, Lu Shaye, also said the tech executive's detention "is not a mere judicial case, but a premeditated political action in which the United States wields its regime power to witch-hunt a Chinese high-tech company out of political consideration."

What's more, he claimed: "The so-called long-arm jurisdiction of the United States ... has no legal basis in international law. The reason behind all the bullying behaviors of the United States is that it pursues power politics against other countries relying on its huge advantage in national strength."

The comments by the Global Times, an influential offspring of the People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the ruling Communist Party of China, and notably by Ambassador Lu, are very telling.

First, from the Chinese perspective, Meng's arrest was purely a political move by Washington. US President Donald Trump's reckless comment that he could intervene if doing so would help secure a trade deal with China might have strengthened such a view.

But during the joint press conference at the US-Canada 2+2 Ministerial Meeting of the foreign and defense chiefs of the two countries on Friday, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland robustly rejected such a view. "Canada is a rule-of-law country," which believes "in honoring our international treaty commitments and in respecting the rule of law and due process in our own country," she said.

"In the case of Ms Meng, due process and rule of law in Canada has been scrupulously followed. There has been no political interference in this process."

If Chinese officials and media truly believe the Trump administration is carrying

out a political plot aimed at Huawei and their country in general, their government should also retaliate against the US. Yet its response - both in words and actions - to the US since Meng's arrest has been much weaker than its reprisal against Canada.

For instance, on December 8 and 9, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Le Yucheng separately summoned Canadian Ambassador John McCallum and US Ambassador Terry Branstad to protest against Meng's detention. But the language he used when meeting these two envoys was remarkably different.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, when facing McCallum, the Chinese official said Canada's detention of Meng "at the behest" of the US not just "severely violates the legitimate rights and interests of the Chinese citizen" but also "ignores the law and is unreasonable, unconscionable, and extremely vile in nature."

By contrast, he only told the American ambassador that what his country "has done severely violates Chinese citizen's legitimate rights and interests, and is vile in nature."

His warnings to the two envoys were also very dissimilar. To the Canadian representative, he said China "strongly urges [Canada] to immediately release [Meng] and effectively protect [her] legitimate rights and interests. Otherwise, it will definitely have grave consequences, and the Canadian side will have to bear the full responsibility for it."

To the US ambassador, Le said his country "strongly urges the US side to attach great importance to [China's] solemn stance ... take immediate measures to correct the wrong actions, and withdraw the arrest warrant against the Chinese citizen. The Chinese side will respond further according to the US side's actions."

True to its words, at least in this case, China has now officially detained two Canadian nationals while it hasn't made a similar move against any Americans.

In fact, since Meng's detention, which took place on the same day that Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Buenos Aires, Beijing has primarily focused its ire on Ottawa while uncharacteristically avoiding a blow-up with Washington.

At that much-talked-about confab in the Argentine capital on the sidelines of the

Group of Twenty summit, the two leaders struck a 90-day trade truce and agreed to work toward a permanent deal within that period.

As some rightly noted, Beijing is in a weaker position and is desperate to end the trade war. Thus it doesn't want to alienate the Trump White House further.

By contrast, the world's most populous country and second-biggest economy is much stronger than Canada. That's why, to borrow the words of the Chinese ambassador to Canada, the Asian giant is willing to "pursue power politics against [the North American country] relying on its huge advantage in national strength."

Arguably, as has been pointedly observed, it's not the first time China has been willing to use its new found power to bully a weaker side. Last year, when the US installed its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea, China used its economic leverage to retaliate against South Korea, not against the US.

What Beijing did then to South Korea, and now is doing to Canada, is completely different from what its "core" leader, Xi Jinping, has constantly and publicly preached on the world stage. In many international homilies, including his keynote speech at the United Nations Office in Geneva in early 2017, Xi denounces "power politics" and urges "big countries" to "treat smaller ones as equals instead of acting as a hegemon imposing their will on others." He also pledges that "no matter how strong its economy grows, China will never seek hegemony."

With its publicly professed "America first" doctrine, it isn't surprising that Trump's America "pursues power politics against other countries."

But for all Xi's nice rhetoric, which even sounds as if he puts not his country but mankind first, China doesn't behave better. In fact, in some cases, it behaves worse than the US. Beijing's retaliation against Canada is further clear evidence that China's claims of benign diplomacy appear to counter its actions.

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