

Foreign Interference Briefing: Intimidation of Hong Kongers

Background

The intimidation of Hong Kongers by the regime in Beijing is an ongoing issue faced by community members. The Chinese Communist Party, or agents acting on its behalf, carries out acts of intimidation targeted at Hong Kongers in Canada with pro-democracy sentiments such as uttering threats or monitoring their activities.

Intimidation is a type of foreign interference that aims to suppress the speech or activities of individuals who are perceived as threats to the Chinese Communist Party. The Party's practice of co-opting individuals of ethnic Chinese heritage and diaspora communities in other foreign interference operations is well documented.¹ It is highly probable that intimidation is also carried out by overseas Chinese acting on behalf of the Party, whether it be coerced or by choice. Currently, individuals acting as an agent for a foreign government are not currently legally required to be identified or registered.

The Chinese Communist Party's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) has been noted to "[exert] control over Chinese nationals and [relay] instructions to various OC [Overseas Chinese] communities for the purpose of intelligence gathering against groups identified as threats to the CPC," according to a Canada Border Services Agency document reported by Global News.²

Beijing has become more active in its targeting of Hong Kong pro-democracy figures living abroad, going so far as to issue bounties and escalating the threat to not only the individuals but their families as well.³ However, Beijing targets not only prominent dissident activists but also those who are not as well-known.

The case studies in this brief outline the experiences of five Hong Konger Canadians from Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary who have been active in the pro-democracy movement or the Hong Kong community.

All of the case studies in this brief are real life case studies of individuals who have been intimidated by the regime in Beijing. Hong Kong Watch has removed details identifying them and used pseudonyms for security and privacy reasons.

¹ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/CACN/meeting-25/evidence>

² <https://globalnews.ca/news/9601649/china-foreign-interference-spying/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/world/asia/hong-kong-bounties-dissidents.html>

Recommendations

1. That the Government **establish a reporting hotline for victims of intimidation** and threats by foreign agents with service available in Cantonese;
2. That relevant committees, including, but not limited to, the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security (SECU), the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE), and the Special Committee on the Canada–People’s Republic of China Relationship (CACN) hold **hearings on the subject**; and
3. That **Bill S-237 moves forward** in the Senate and the House of Commons swiftly to establish a Foreign Agent Registry.

Case Studies

Case A

Anna was an active participant in the 2019 pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. After encountering altercations with the police, leading to the detention of her friends and fellow protesters, she fled to Canada in 2020. She has since claimed asylum.

She settled in Calgary, where she continued her advocacy for democracy in Hong Kong. She is one of the founding members of a group of volunteers that assist persecuted Hong Kongers seeking asylum in Canada.

Anna has been receiving threatening anonymous messages on Telegram since she spoke out publicly against the Chinese government. In the enclosed screen captured images, the sender sent harassing messages that insult her physical appearance and her age, while referencing her advocacy for Hong Kong.

She also received graphic videos, including a bloody video of a woman suffering severe blunt force trauma to the head and a video of a beheading. These videos were sent with the caption “karma for New Hong Kong Cultural Club,” the name of another pro-democracy organization with which she is involved.

The sender also sent messages that revealed their knowledge of details of Anna’s personal life, including the name of her boyfriend, the name of her employer, the address of her workplace, as well as photos of her friend.

She has reported the threats to CSIS and the RCMP.

Case B

Mark is the co-founder of the New Hong Kong Cultural Club, an organization that has helped over 30 asylum seekers from Hong Kong. He is based in Calgary.

Mark received an anonymous message on Telegram last April that reminded him to renew his car license, though the car is no longer being used and has been parked in front of his house for a long time. He believes the sender implied that they know where he lives, and he is being watched.

Other messages threaten that he will be beaten in Chinatown because of his work in helping Hong Kong asylum seekers.

He has reported the threats to CSIS and the RCMP.

Case C

Grace is one of the core members of the New Hong Kong Cultural Club, a pro-democracy organization. She is based in Vancouver.

She has been threatened by anonymous Telegram messages about a planned trip to Japan in February 2023. The anonymous sender “reminds” her to “take care” of her young daughter during the trip. Grace was shocked by the information leaked about her personal travel to Japan as that is not publicly disclosed information.

She has been in touch with RCMP and CSIS in Vancouver to share information about threatening cases.

Case D

Peter is a core member of the Calgary Movement for Democracy in China, and a consultant of the New Hong Kong Cultural Club. He is also a member of the Friends of Hong Kong Calgary, which is a pressure group that hosts rallies for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement and helps asylum seekers from Hong Kong and China.

He received a threatening Telegram message with a beheading video, with a warning that he and all members of New Hong Kong Culture Club would suffer the same fate as the individual in the video. This was sent along with a photo of him participating in a rally outside of the China Consulate office in Calgary that was posted to social media.

He has reported the threats to CSIS and the RCMP.