

The Human Face of Systemic Rivalry and the Mistake of Not Speaking Out

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Earlier today, China's authorities charged with spying two Canadian citizens, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, who have been held in jail in the country for a year and a half. They could face up to life imprisonment if found guilty, which all observers take to be a foregone conclusion, given how the Chinese judicial system operates. The two men are widely thought to have been arrested in December 2018 in retribution for the arrest in Canada a few days previously of the Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, who is the subject of an extradition request by the United States.

This has given rise to further accusations that the Chinese government is increasingly willing to engage in "hostage diplomacy." Earlier this year, the publisher Gui Minhai—a Chinese-born Swedish citizen—who was abducted to China in 2015 was sentenced to ten years for "providing intelligence" overseas.

While individuals, journalist, and organizations in Canada and many other countries have consistently publicized the case of Kovrig and Spavor, the governments of Canada and its different allies have been relatively muted in the hope of solving this problem quietly with the Chinese authorities, as they have done before in the case of other targeting of their citizens by different regimes.

The charging of the two Canadians shows that a hushed approach alone does not work with repressive governments. Diplomacy, with its necessary requirements of inconspicuousness, is necessary. But democracies around the world, individually and—crucially—collectively also need to make it very publicly clear that the Chinese government and others that emulate it that taking innocent individuals hostage for international leverage is unacceptable and will face pushback.

At the abstract level of international politics or at the concrete human level of cases like that of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, engagement cannot be silent for fear of the costs of Beijing's displeasure.

Impunity in targeting citizens of other countries, wherever they may find themselves, is not only an issue with China. Russia has not been shy in detaining, or worse, citizens of other countries, in the country or elsewhere. This week, Germany's authorities accused Russian state agencies of organizing the murder of a Georgian citizen, who was previously a Chechen rebel, in a Berlin park in 2019. Also this week, a U.S. citizen, Paul Whelan, detained in Russia since 2018 was sentenced to 16 years for spying, in a case that now looks like

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it might involve an exchange for Russians jailed in the United States for arms and drug trafficking. Since the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, the country's authorities have also been accused of engaging in "hostage diplomacy," as in the high-profile case of the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel, for example.

When faced with the real and seemingly intractable human cost when some of their citizens are taken as pawns in geopolitical games, governments will understandably attempt quiet, offstage diplomacy to end their ordeal. However, history shows this is easily used by repressive regimes acting in bad faith to string them along indefinitely while continuing to exploit the leverage such situations give them. At some point, the use of back channels, discreet intermediaries, and the such needs to be complemented by a willingness to speak up loud and clear about the wrongs being perpetrated against innocents. Ultimately, there cannot be a tradeoff between discussing privately and speaking out. Such a tradeoff is precisely what repressive regimes play on when engaging in behavior such as "hostage diplomacy" to build leverage against other countries.

People like Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, and those who will follow them one day, put a human face on the nature of the systemic rivalry or great-power competition that is building up between China and not only the United States but a wide range of democratic countries around the world, including Canada. In recent weeks, the Chinese regime has embarked on an apparently omnidirectional effort to see how far it can push the boundaries of accepted behavior in its neighborhood and further afield—from the new national security law in Hong Kong to the border clash with India, intruding in Taiwan's airspace, suspected cyberattacks in Australia, and "wolf warrior" diplomacy in Europe. At this geopolitical level as at the individual level, it is trying to see what it can get away with. In both cases, the human cost can be devastating, whether for the families of its hostages or for victims of any conflict it triggers.

The members of the democratic international community—whether the United States, European countries, Canada, Australia, and China's neighbors—face a genuinely daunting challenge in how to deal with an increasingly aggressive Chinese regime that feels itself strong. Whether this is framed as systemic rivalry, great-power competition, equidistance, or any other label, the commonality is that engaging with China is inevitable, regardless of the debate around decoupling. But either at the abstract level of international politics or at the concrete human level of cases like that of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, engagement cannot be silent for fear of the costs of Beijing's displeasure. However difficult, at both levels it can be and should be accompanied by willingness to speak out, preferably in unison, against the Chinese regime's abuse of its power. For the world's democracies, failing to do so is a major step on the way to losing the competition with their authoritarian rivals.

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