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Defending Singapore Against Foreign Interference

By Muhammad Faizal Abdul Rahman

SYNOPSIS

Foreign interference is the invisible hand of foreign states seeking to undermine a target state's national interests. It affects the target state from the inside by infiltrating its national institutions and people. It is a threat that smaller states like Singapore must defend against while navigating an increasingly contested world.

COMMENTARY

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE is a form of [political warfare](#) – coercive means short of conventional war – that lies in the continuum between diplomacy and aggression. It is an application of [soft force](#) that entails a foreign state using its influence to affect the politics and policies of the target state covertly.

A foreign state with hostile intent would undermine the sovereignty of the target state – without violating its physical territory – by infiltrating its national institutions and people. The desired outcomes of the foreign state are political and economic gains at the expense of the target state.

Understanding the Threat

Information operations, influence operations and foreign interference are often conflated as the same phenomenon, but there are profound differences. It is important to appreciate the differences to develop the appropriate countermeasures.

In information operations, a foreign state undermines ideas and individuals – such as racial harmony and legitimacy of national leaders – who are important for the target state's survival. The foreign state may conduct this through online disinformation campaigns to affect the socio-political attitudes and obfuscate the minds of the target state's people.

Influence operations are broader in scope and may use other methods in concert with information operations. It gives the foreign state access to the target state's infrastructure, information, ideas and individuals (4Is).

Many foreign states leverage instruments of their national power – diplomacy, information, military and economy – to grow their influence overseas. Influence operations are not malign if conducted in an “[open, lawful and transparent manner](#)” such as public diplomacy, technology transfers and economic aid. A foreign state would cultivate relationships with intermediaries – such as individuals, communities and organisations – in the target state as friends or agents of influence who can speak on its behalf.

However, the foreign state may plan to use its influence in a covert manner. The purpose of the plan is to persuade or coerce the target state into adopting national policies that would be strategically advantageous for the foreign state. There is hostile intent when such plans exist.

Weaponising Influence

Foreign interference is the escalation from hostile intent to a hostile act. The foreign state weaponises the influence that it has built overseas over time to deliberately and deceptively affect the politics and policies of the target state. If influence operations constitute the process of building power, foreign interference constitutes the process of wielding power.

Russia, for example, is allegedly leveraging its position as the dominant supplier of [natural gas](#) to Europe to interfere in the security policies of European states through the energy infrastructure. This interference can undermine relations between the US and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

China had allegedly leveraged its position as a provider of technology to siphon [information](#) from the African Union's (AU) headquarters. This interference can give China an upper hand on bilateral issues with African states.

The West had allegedly used [diplomatic](#) and media influence to challenge the ideas of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong (HK) and support protesters against important individuals – HK officials – who govern the city. This interference supposedly seeks to contain China's rise.

Indeed, a foreign state that employs foreign interference seeks changes to the national institutions of the target state. These changes allow the foreign state to affect the target state's policy decisions indirectly. The foreign state would then achieve a stronger bargaining position, vis-à-vis the target state on bilateral and international issues.

Why Target Singapore?

Geographical size does not render smaller states like Singapore impervious to foreign interference. If a smaller state has significant political and economic clout in the international space, a foreign state may perceive that strategic gains can be harnessed

by interfering in the smaller state's affairs. A foreign state may also target a smaller state that it perceives as a friend or ally of its geopolitical rivals.

Singapore was a target of foreign interference during the Cold War. In the 1970s, the [Eastern Sun](#) newspaper had received funding from Chinese Communist elements to publish articles to shape the political attitudes in Singapore. The [Singapore Herald](#) newspaper had received funding from Southeast Asian elements to campaign against National Service. In the 1980s, the "[Hendrickson affair](#)" involved a US diplomat cultivating Singaporeans "as proxies to influence the domestic politics of Singapore" ahead of the General Elections.

Although these examples occurred in the past, foreign interference remains a threat, and its methods evolve as the geopolitical factors that underpin it still exist. The threat is higher now as the US-China great power rivalry that risks becoming the next Cold War is affecting Singapore. Indeed, Singapore is a piece on the chessboard of geopolitical contests.

Countermeasures Against the Threat

Countermeasures against foreign interference must defend the four components (4Is) of the target state. Firstly, the countermeasures must uphold the sovereignty of national institutions by defending the infrastructure and information that constitute their foundations. These may include diversifying sources of essential supplies and technologies and enhancing cyber defence capabilities against insider threats.

Secondly, the countermeasures must defend the ideas and individuals that define national identity and policies from the malign influence of foreign states. These include promoting [information literacy](#) and emphasising national education among the people, and better intelligence gathering on foreign states seeking to influence the political and policymaking echelons.

A [whole-of-government approach](#) must coordinate these countermeasures to ensure their effectiveness. Ultimately, foreign interference is part of a foreign state's exercise of national power to become stronger.

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