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#33 Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape

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Key Takeaways

- China is targeting by attrition—both within its borders and in the Netherlands—critical voices about China (the so-called chilling effect), to diminish the activity of critical voices, causing them to be drowned out or give up entirely. Affecting both correspondents in China and specific groups in the Netherlands.
- China is one of the most sophisticated actors in transnational repression worldwide. This also manifests itself in the Netherlands, especially among human rights activists, non-Han Chinese diaspora and Chinese students.

Recommendations

To the Dutch government:

1. Send a strong diplomatic message after incidents surrounding correspondents, journalists and groups vulnerable to Chinese intimidation.
2. Behind the scenes, always indicate through formal channels that the Netherlands resolutely condemns influence and that Dutch correspondents must be able to do their work unhindered. Emphasizing reciprocity.

To editors:

1. Conduct structural discussions in editorial offices about transnational repression, intimidation and public and psychological warfare by authoritarian regimes in the Netherlands.
2. Develop protocol for authoritarian practices towards journalists in the Netherlands.

To the government, editors and interest groups: technical and other support is needed

1. Facilitate security training, with knowledge of digital security and use of equipment by security experts.
2. Educate journalists, editors and other relevant professionals on the mental health implications of the constant stress and pressure of the Chinese Party State surveillance system.

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Executive Summary

The aim of this study is to understand the extent of Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape. Different manifestations and tools and tactics used by China are highlighted. This report focuses on three different aspects of influence:

1. Working conditions of Dutch correspondents in China;
2. Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch-language media landscape in the Netherlands;
3. Chinese influence and interference in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands.

The main conclusion is that China is targeting by attrition – both within its borders and in the Netherlands – critical voices about China (the so-called chilling effect), to diminish the activity of critical voices, causing them to be drowned out or to give up entirely. This affects both correspondents in China and specific groups in the Netherlands. China is one of the most sophisticated actors in transnational repression worldwide. This also manifests itself in the Netherlands, especially among human rights activists, non-Han Chinese diaspora and Chinese students.

China's complete surveillance society makes correspondents' working conditions arduous. Editors in the Netherlands are not well equipped in the face of social and psychological insecurity and threats from authoritarian countries like China; neither for correspondents in China, but certainly not when these practices take place in the Netherlands. China employs a range of tactics targeting the media landscape, including in the Netherlands (see Chapter 5 for an overview). A notable feature is that China (unlike Russia's often more physically focused tactics) operates much more subtly, delivering socio-cognitive (or socio-psychological) subtle provocations that are only fully understood with substantial background information.

All groups of Dutch Chinese routinely apply self-censorship and self-surveillance. Intimidation tactics common in China itself are also applied in the Netherlands to specific groups, such as students, activists and non-Han Chinese groups like the Uighurs and Tibetans. They feel actively watched and pressured. Protection of the foundations of Dutch democracy, freedoms, political system, rule of law and society must be central to relations with China. Take strict action on interference in the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands, ensure visibility of these groups and invest in society-wide awareness campaigns around influence and psychological warfare of authoritarian regimes, as China is not the only actor in this.

Above all, be careful and balanced towards Chinese and Asian Dutch people. It is important not to demonise them or reinforce pre-existing or new stereotypes. Besides the risk of discrimination and isolation, by doing so you promote alienation of these groups, and by doing so you play right into the hands of the Chinese Party State. Protect diaspora groups in the Netherlands and actively and publicly propagate these safeguards