

# Beijing will suffer to ‘teach us a lesson’

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As the 1970s drew to a close, China’s leaders had a long and growing list of complaints about the behaviour of their communist comrades in Hanoi. Beijing was concerned that Vietnam was growing too close to the Soviet Union, that its leaders were not sufficiently grateful to China for the financial and military support that Beijing had provided, and that Vietnam had been too assertive in border disputes between the two countries.

Even worse, China’s leaders were outraged by Vietnam’s military and political interventions in Cambodia and elsewhere, seeing them as an attempt to curb Chinese influence in the region.

By March 1979, the Communist Party leadership in Beijing had lost patience, and 200,000 Chinese troops streamed across the border into Vietnam’s Cao Bang province to “teach Vietnam a lesson”.

What many expected to be a quick and easy Chinese victory soon came to a grinding halt in the face of staunch Vietnamese resistance. China withdrew its troops from Vietnam after just 27 days. Although the exact numbers remain uncertain, the best estimates of the human cost to China of teaching Vietnam that lesson are more than 25,000 Chinese dead and more than 40,000 wounded.

That’s some lesson. That’s some cost. The Chinese premier at the time of the Sino-Vietnamese War was Deng Xiaoping. For Deng, what looked to the rest of the world like costly defeat was spun into strategic success. His actions in invading Vietnam stoked nationalist fervour in China, and his standing within party and country was significantly enhanced.

No doubt, President Xi Jinping is well aware of the history, and Australian politicians and policy makers would also be well advised to reflect on the causes of Sino-Vietnamese conflict. A previously

trusted partner is “punished” for becoming too closely aligned with a strategic rival, for opposing China’s territorial claims, for being insufficiently grateful for China’s contribution to its national wellbeing, and for conspiring to thwart China’s aspirations for a political and military sphere of influence.

Sound familiar? It should, because right now the Chinese leadership under Xi is committed to teaching Australia a lesson for similar perceived transgressions (plus several more for good measure).

In April 2020, the editor of the Global Times (a state-owned Chinese newspaper) described Australia as being “a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China’s shoes; sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off”. He suggested China would use “economic coercion” to force Australia to be more compliant. China’s ambassador to Australia, Cheng Jingye, underlined that this was the official party line when he suggested that a mass boycott of Australian produce by China might be on the cards.

Then the China Daily, another organ of the CCP, accused Scott Morrison of “rash participation in the US administration’s attempts to contain China”. The editorial went on to say that Australia would “pay tremendously for its misjudgment”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was no mention of the price that China itself would have to pay to settle the account.

The roll call of China’s grievances with Australia is long, and growing with every denied investment proposal and every expulsion of Chinese nationals on national security grounds. In mid-November last year, a Chinese diplomat in Canberra “leaked” a list of 14 grievances to a media outlet, accusing the Australian government of “poisoning bilateral relations”. The leak was followed by a Beijing spokesman calling on Australia to “correct its errors”.

China’s approach requires not simply that Australia apologise or promise a new way of broaching sensitive subjects with Chinese counterparts in future. That is one aim to be sure, but it is coupled with a determination to punish Australia, to teach us a “lesson” this time. And it is that punitive layer in China’s actions during the past six months that has wrong-footed many Australians, including Canberra insiders and media pundits.

Economic rationalism would suggest that because imports of Australian iron ore and coal are essential ingredients in fuelling China’s economy, and because there are few if any alternatives for China to obtain those materials at the same quality and price, it would be irrational for China to

restrict their import through tariffs or boycotts. To do so would drive up costs in China, trigger power shortages and stunt economic growth.

The problem, however, is that examining China's sanctions and diplomatic aggression solely through the lens of economic theory can only provide an incomplete understanding of what is driving Chinese behaviour at this time. For China's "thought leaders", including Xi, if there is a price to pay for teaching Australia a lesson, then so be it.

The Cultural Revolution in the 1960s cost between 500,000 and two million Chinese lives and unleashed a decade of chaos and two decades of delayed economic growth. But boy did it teach those revanchist capitalists and bourgeois reactionaries.

By comparison, crates of dead crayfish, a lack of premium shiraz and even power brownouts and higher spot prices for coal and iron ore must look like a small price to pay.

China's view of its place in the world, not just in the 21st century but in the several millennia that preceded it, simply does not accommodate Australia as being China's economic, political or military peer. For Beijing's leaders, its "wolf warrior diplomats" and its increasingly bellicose media organisations, Australia's perceived hostility towards China raises issues of national prestige, not national income.

Australia's insistence on sending an international delegation to China to inquire into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our eagerness to enter into multilateral security arrangements with India, Japan and the US that effectively encircle China, all reinforce the old tropes of Western countries doing China down in word and deed. Australia is seen as shaking hands with China when it comes to trade, but slapping it in the face when it comes to COVID-19, Uighurs, Hong Kong, Taiwan, freedom of navigation operations and plenty more besides (see the list of 14 grievances referred to above).

In Canberra, separating economic and trade issues from our political and diplomatic relationship with China appears completely reasonable and desirable. In Beijing, not so much.

With the financial costs mounting for both China and Australia, ministers in Canberra must be hoping that in 2021 President Xi will adopt the pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and declare a tactical loss to be a strategic victory.

Only then can the economic rationalists hope to see a return to business as usual.

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