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Calculated show of contempt by China

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As so often happens with mass production, the quality of China's lies has plummeted as their number has increased. However, the purpose of its latest outrage was not so much to deceive as to humiliate.

To say that is not to deny that the ludicrously faked image will find an audience. The ancients could not have imagined the internet, much less the Twittersphere; but Virgil rightly called malicious claims the "fastest misfortune" afflicting mankind, while the winged slippers of Hermes — the incorrigible trickster who served as the god of messengers — allowed "slander, which is sharper than any sword" to travel "more rapidly than the wind, quicker than any bird".

Moreover, having thus sped around the globe, the image of an Australian soldier allegedly slicing an Afghan child's throat could have an enduring presence. As George Orwell put it in Nineteen Eighty-Four, "It was true that there was no such person as Comrade Ogilvy; but a couple of faked photographs would soon bring him into existence — and once the act of forgery was forgotten, he would exist just as authentically as Charlemagne or Julius Caesar."

Yet the damage that might inflict on our reputation can hardly explain China's actions. After all, it must have been apparent that the falsehood would immediately be exposed. And under normal circumstances, that should have deterred the fake image's release or ensured that it occurred through a notionally separate media outlet whose conduct the Chinese authorities could readily disavow.

Instead, the tweet was issued by the Foreign Ministry, giving it official status. To make things worse, once the fraud was exposed, the Chinese, far from apologising, doubled down, compounding the offence.

Now, no one could regard unvarnished truthfulness as the master trait of diplomacy. But neither has vilifying a country with which one is at peace ever been considered acceptable behaviour. To brazenly engage in it, as the Chinese did, amounts to a calculated show of contempt.

That show of contempt, with all the anger it was bound to provoke, was hardly an accident; rather, it was squarely aimed at proving that China can get away with it — and the more searing the anger, the more convincing the proof. Nor was it an accident that Australia was the chosen victim. In effect, if the objective was to demonstrate — as foreign minister Yang Jiechi first proclaimed a decade ago — that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact", the target had to be a substantial power.

But Australia's size and wealth were not the only relevant factors; significant, too, must have been our deep historical, cultural and strategic ties to the West. Given those ties, treating Australia to a crass humiliation, as if it were the puniest vassal of a tributary state, was certain to resonate throughout the Asia-Pacific.

Adding to the benefits, China could reasonably expect its gesture to heighten the divisions within Australia, further sapping our ability to resist China's increasingly strident demands.

Underpinning that assessment would have been Mao's analytical framework, which Xi Jinping has placed at the centre of the Chinese Communist Party's world view. Seen through that framework's prism, Australia's distinctive feature is less its economic reliance on China than the "comprador" nature of large parts of its political and business elites.

A Portuguese word meaning purchaser, the term harks back to the early days of long-distance trade, when it referred to the foreign merchants who resided in the treaty ports. However, beginning with the Fifth Congress of the Third (Communist) International in 1924, it was used by Stalin and then by Mao to designate that part of the bourgeoisie in colonised economies whose interests were entirely aligned with the colonial power.

Derided by Mao as rent boys, the comprador class, and "the reactionary section of the intelligentsia attached to them", would always sacrifice the national interest to the interests of the country's foreign exploiters. Certain to "side with imperialism", the compradors constituted "an extreme counter-revolutionary group" that the CCP had to eliminate — as it did after securing power in 1949.

But just as the compradors had, according to Mao, undermined China's independence, allowing the imperialists to "ride roughshod everywhere", so Mao's successors must view those they consider to be today's Australian compradors as the surest bulwark against an effective Australian response to China's own imperial pretensions. And just as the original colonial powers had, in Lenin's analysis, used their "enormous 'superabundance of capital' " to suborn countries that, although "officially independent", were "in fact, trapped in a net of financial and diplomatic dependences", so Lenin's Chinese disciples are intent on converting their economy's worldwide reach into a global system of power.

In part, China's neo-imperialism relies on multiplying in advanced and developing economies the comprador bourgeoisies whose primary asset — which they will vociferously defend — is their privileged access to China. However, to be effective, China must also show dependent economies that any departure from the Chinese line will be punished many times over, in a modern version of the colonial powers' gunboat diplomacy.

It is consequently unsurprising that China's communist leaders so unashamedly echo the statement Thucydides famously attributed to the Athenians in their debate with the Melians: nature and divinity, they said, had decreed that "the strong do what they will, the weak what they must".

And although the punishments China dispenses are, at least so far, scarcely comparable to the mass slaughter the Athenians inflicted on the Melians for refusing to support them obediently in their conflict with Sparta, the underlying intention of proving to any waverers the costs the domineering power could force them to bear is surely the same.

But as careful readers of Thucydides know, it was the Athenians themselves who ultimately paid the highest price. Play by the rules, the Melians had sagely recommended, because some day you too will crave their protection; and, they warned the Athenians, "this applies even more in your case" because "if you (who are widely despised) fall, you will be subject to the fiercest retaliation of all".

That was a lesson the Athenians scorned; yet as hubris led them to disaster, it was, Thucydides tells us, seared into them by suffering "too great to be measured by tears". Underestimating the capacity to resist of those they thought weak, they sowed the winds of envy and resentment, only to reap the whirlwind.

Yes, history has no predetermined outcomes, nor does it follow prewritten librettos; but as their lies and provocations mount, China's new imperialists should look back on the ruins of their predecessors and take a long, deep breath.